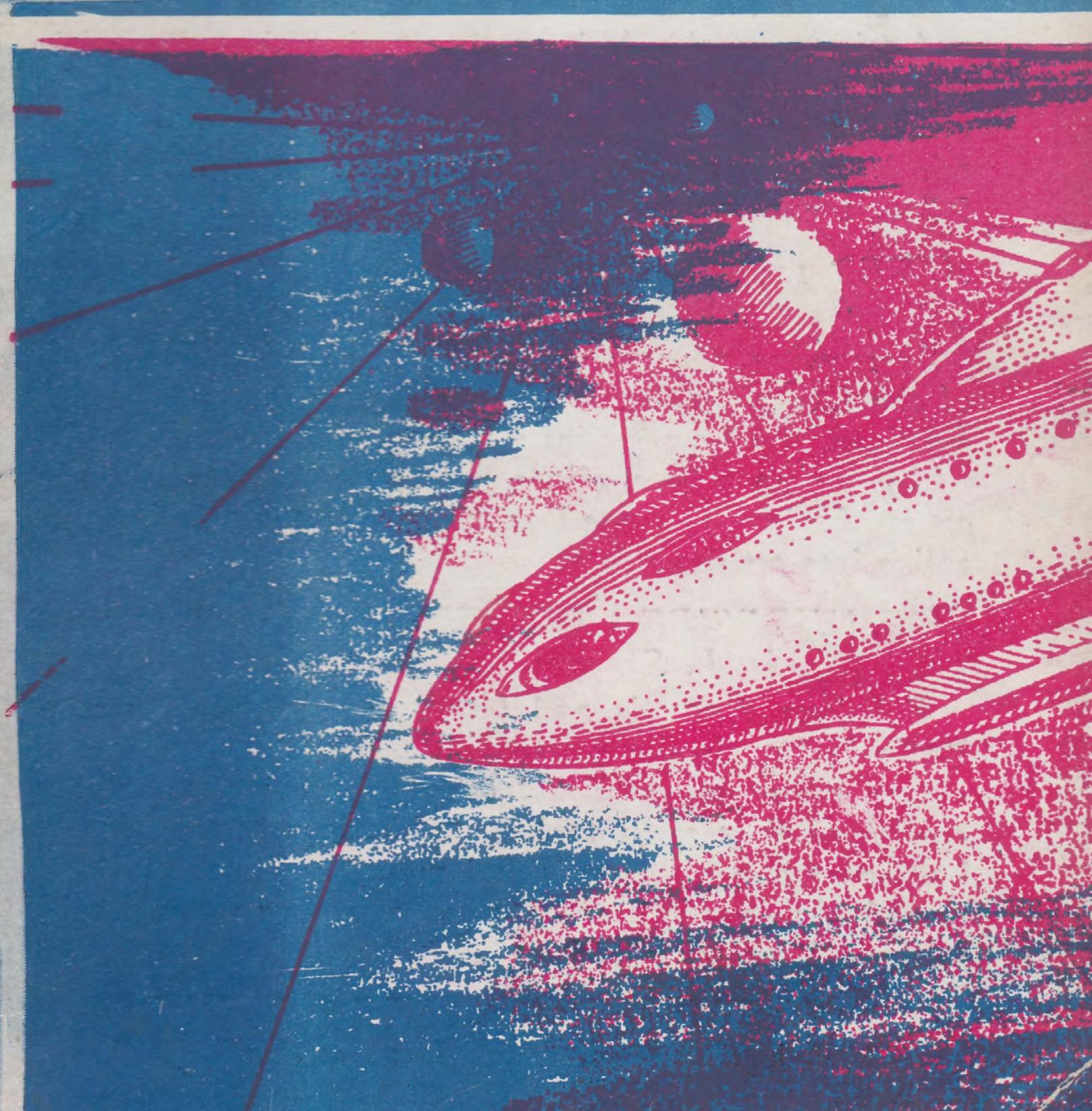


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THE EYES

BY HENRY HASSE

PETER HIGGINS hadn't realized where his footsteps were taking him, until he glanced up suddenly and found that he had left the main highway far behind. In the little wooded ravine just ahead was old man Martin's cabin. Force of habit, Higgins supposed, had led him here, for Martin had died two weeks ago and the cabin was abandoned. He realized he was going to miss the old man and their philosophical discussions.

Suddenly he stopped, peered ahead. From here he could just see the cabin's roof. A thin trickle of smoke was coming from the chimney. Apparently someone had moved in!

Higgins hurried forward, reached the rocky little path leading down. But his steps slowed—partly because he wasn't young any more, and partly because his imagination had started working.

"Better be careful," he told himself. "No telling who's taken over the place. It might be gangsters—or kidnappers!"

He circled the cabin, moved cautiously through the brush to a side window. Carefully he raised his eyes to the level of the glass. It was rather grimy, and the interior was dim. But Higgins saw well enough.

And it wasn't gangsters or kidnappers.

What he saw was a pair of eyes, huge and bulbous, sus-

pended in the air over the rickety kitchen table! There were heavy grotesque lids above the eyes, but that was absolutely all. Nothing was there to hold them. They just seemed to float. That they were very much alive there could be no doubt, for Higgins saw them blink once or twice!

Peter Higgins was imaginative, but not this imaginative. For perhaps ten seconds he stared, and felt the hair rise at the back of his neck. Then his legs became weak like wet macaroni. With a little moan he sank into a huddled heap below the window, gulping for air, reassurance, and the return of his wits.

Consecutive thought came back slowly. Of course he hadn't really seen what he thought he had seen! But he had seen something—optical illusion! That was a familiar phrase and his mind seized upon it frantically. The grimy window had distorted his vision somehow. Perhaps he'd seen a reflection of his own eyes in the pane.

He rose, rubbed his startled eyes clear, then wiped a small patch of the window glass. Again he peered. Yes, he could see much more clearly now . . . but he suddenly wished he couldn't.

For it wasn't optical illusion. The isolated eyes were indisputably *there*, and it was immediately apparent that they were twice too large and too bulbous to be human! Furthermore, Higgins could now see what they were doing. They were peering down at a magazine that lay open on the table—seemed to be reading it! He could see the eyes shift slightly as they flashed over the lines.

"Lordy! Oh, Lordy!" Higgins moaned as he turned away. "I haven't had a drink all day—I know I haven't!" He ventured one more look. "But I need one now!"

He dashed pell-mell through the brush, reached the path and didn't stop running until he was on the dirt road above. There he sat down on a boulder, gasping.

The magazine, he knew was one of Martin's science-fiction magazines. The cabin abounded with them. But

what was it he had seen. Was it old man Martin's ghost, come back to finish a story he had left unread? Higgins banished the thought. He wasn't sure he believed in ghosts, and even if he did, he doubted that they'd appear in the form of huge isolated eyes. Well, then—was he going crazy? He tried to marshall his thoughts.

Suddenly he felt his hair bristling again. He had the feeling that he wasn't alone. He looked up quickly, and once more felt his mind slipping away.

There, hovering just above him, staring curiously down—were the Eyes!

Higgins didn't run this time. He tried! But his limbs wouldn't obey him. Then a strange, soothing calm seemed to touch his mind and he heard a voice.

"Please do not leave me! Look at me. You are no longer afraid."

Wonder of wonders, it was true. He wasn't afraid. He looked up at the Eyes and they seemed very friendly! They were much too large, but almost human otherwise, the corneas clear and blue. Higgins remembered his science-fiction and said the first thing that occurred to him:

"Are—are you speaking to me telepathically?"

"No. My speech is vocal." The voice was pleasant too, with a clear, bell-like tonality.

Higgins gulped and wondered where the voice came from then. But he didn't ask. The Eyes were examining him quizzically. They tilted a little and floated around him until he felt uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

"H-how did you know I was no longer afraid?" he stammered, not quite sure of that fact himself.

The Eyes widened a little. "Because I willed it! Yes, I can influence your mental impulses to a limited extent, but telepathic communication would be impossible."

Higgins wasn't flattered. "You—you were reading one of the science-fiction magazines," he ventured.

"Yes. Most interesting!" The Eyes became bluer. "But your authors have strange, erroneous conceptions of

us. Why one of them goes so far as to describe us as petal-headed!"

Higgins' mind leaped. "You don't mean that you're—"

"Yes, of course I'm Martian. Just how could the delusion have arisen that we are war-like monstrosities, lusting for conquest?"

"I—I'm sorry," Higgins said humbly. He wondered if the Martians had science-fiction, and if so, how they described Earthmen! He was about to ask, but the voice went on.

"We are very peaceable, you know. I was worried about my reception—and now that I find myself stranded here, I shall need someone's kindness and help."

"Stranded! But didn't you come in a spaceship? I'd like to see it!"

"Alas, I fear that is impossible now. It was so badly damaged in one of your Earth storms that I thought it advisable to destroy it. A terrible flash of blue came down from the sky—"

"Lightning."

"Yes. It struck our ship as we were about to land. We came plunging into this ravine. Our controls were utterly fused—a molten mass."

"We? Us?" Higgins was suddenly apprehensive. If there were any more of these Eyes floating around, he wanted to know about it!

"Only Lhotu and myself. Lhotu was—was killed instantly, and now I find myself alone on a strange world." The voice was infinitely sad. The Eyes suddenly filled with tears, huge glistening tears large as golf-balls. A few of them oozed out, dangled a moment, then fell with a splash into the dust of the road.

Peter Higgins was a kindly man. He had always felt sympathetic in the presence of tears—and that they were Martian tears, from a pair of grotesque Eyes, made no difference. He suddenly hated all authors who wrote so cold-bloodedly about Martians.

"Now don't you worry," Higgins consoled. "This is a big world, you know, and I'm sure we'll find a place for you in it. *I'm* your friend, anyway." He would have patted the creature sympathetically on the shoulder, or shaken its hand, only it didn't seem to have any of either.

"Thank you! Now I feel I can tell you the whole story, and—there is something else you must know." It hesitated. "Yes, it is best that you know. There is more to me than eyes!"

"Why, gosh, yes." It suddenly dawned on Higgins. "You have a voice, and apparently ears, so there must be more!"

"Exactly. Much more. And that is why I want you to hear my story and decide to befriend me."

Slowly at first, and then with growing confidence, the Martian began his narrative.

"Long ago, so long that it is probably not even recorded in your history, we Martians achieved space-travel. A party of them came to Earth. They came in peace, you understand, and unarmed, and not disguised as I am now. They were received with horror and loathing by the Earth people of that time! The Martians were set upon most brutally, many of them killed, and only a few escaped to bear the tidings back to Mars.

"Physically the Martians were, and probably still would be, repellent to Earthian minds. We are what you would describe as only semi-human, and in addition we have certain necessary appendages—but I need not go into that.

"Suffice it to say that we learned our lesson well. We were so disheartened that we never visited Earth again. No other planet sustained intelligent life. So the aeons passed, and our science of space-transportation was advisably forgotten.

"Only recently our scientists rediscovered it. However, the initial experience still remains in our recorded history, and most of our Elders were opposed to any more Earth

ventures. For a number of years we tried to think of a safe way . . .

"Then one of our scientists solved the problem! In experimenting with certain plants in our dead sea-bottoms, he managed to process a strange liquid which allowed ordinary light vibrations to pass through opaque material, just as some higher frequency vibrations pass naturally through solid objects. In that way he achieved——"

"Invisibility!" Higgins exclaimed.

"Then it was argued that by this process we might disguise ourselves to any desired degree. By making our appearance somewhat less repellent to you Earthians, we might come here and start peaceful negotiations."

"It—it sounds all right," Higgins said uncertainly, backing away a little. "But what happened?"

"Our Elders finally agreed, although reluctantly. Lhotu and I were selected to make the trip. In the event that we should need to further disguise ourselves, a small tank of the precious liquid was brought along. All was well until we crashed in your Earth storm.

"Lhotu was at the controls and must have died instantly. I lost consciousness. When I regained it, some time later, I found that I was literally drenched with the liquid. As a consequence you see me as I am now—only my eyes remained visible! But," he ended—"Perhaps that is best after all."

Higgins felt that the Martian was waiting for his comment. What could he say? So many times he had read about Martians, and now he had one on his hands! An invisible Martian! Should he call the museums? The scientists? The reporters? Apparently the Martian was reading his mind, for now the voice said:

"Yes, perhaps you should present me to your world. It appears that I will be here for a long time, and I must make the most of it. My people," he said sadly, "will give us up for dead, and it may be a long time before they make this venture again."

"Yes. Now let me see." Higgins sighed. "First I'll take you home and introduce you to my wife. Then we'll decide what to do. By the way, you must have a name?"

"It is Dheya-Raj."

"And mine is Higgins." He instinctively extended his hand, but the Eyes moved quickly back. Higgins, remembering the reason, let his hand drop hastily. "Well, Dheya, I have a small truck farm just a mile from here. If you don't mind walking."

As they went along in silence, Higgins glanced at the Eyes bobbing along in the air beside him. He was becoming used to them now, almost fond of them! Then he received a shock as he happened to glance down at the dust in the road.

He saw what appeared to be a long, curious footprint, and yet it was not a footprint. It was more like a continuous trail in the dust, and it seemed to *slither*.

As they approached the kitchen door, Higgins became a bit nervous.

"Martha never did care much for science fiction," he explained. "What'll she think when I bring home a real live Martian?" He pondered. "Maybe you'd better get ready to use that trick with her mind, like you did with me."

They entered the kitchen where Martha was preparing supper. Dheya held back a little, waiting for Peter to make explanations. But it was too late. Martha had already caught a glimpse of the Eyes.

When Peter had revived his wife, Dyeya exerted his mental control and Martha didn't shriek or faint again. She gulped down a glass of water as Peter told the story. After that she accepted the Martian philosophically, much as she used to accept the stray dogs that Peter brought home.

Higgins suddenly wondered what Martians ate!

At the table, he found out. Dyeha sat—or floated, as it always seemed—right across from him. Apparently the

Martian didn't relish the lamb chops, potatoes, fresh green peas or lemon meringue pie. He ate a few of the peas but that was all. The fork just seemed to float through the air, from the plate and down again. It was most unnerving. Then Dheya spied the fruit in the center of the table. An orange floated through the air. It seemed to peel itself, and finally disappeared section by section! When Dheya had consumed nine oranges in this manner he seemed satisfied.

"Most of our foods on Mars are synthetic," he explained. "Our deserts are too arid to grow fruit like this. I find it very tasty."

Higgins gulped down his coffee and went to the telephone. "I'll call in the reporters, Dheya, and you can give 'em an interview. Tell them all about Mars, what you think of our world, and so on."

"Reporters?" Dheya seemed to intuit the meaning of the word. Then the Eyes moved horizontally as though he were shaking his head. "I doubt if they will come," he said vaguely.

"Won't come to interview a real Martian? Sure they will! They'll bring cameras too, so look your best!"

Dheya was right. On Higgins' first try a disgruntled voice came through the receiver. "Will you talk more clearly, please? Sounded just like you said you had a *Martian*."

"That's what I did say! I found him out here in a ravine, and—"

"Better go home and sleep it off, buddy!" A sputtering, then the click of a receiver being jammed back on the hook.

Undaunted, Higgins tried a second paper. Same result, but more vociferous this time. Ears burning, he tried a third time. And he met with better luck. At least the editor listened.

"Hmmm," was the comment. It was quite apparent he thought he was dealing with a crank. "Well, I'll take a

chance—might be good for some laughs. Give me that address. I'll send a reporter out in the morning."

"Good for some laughs!" Higgins said bitterly. "Bah!"

At noon the next day the reporter arrived. It was apparent his editor had given him definite instructions on how to handle the story. "Hi, Mac," was his greeting when Higgins came to the door. "Are you the Martian?"

Higgins' lips went tight, but he invited the young man in. He introduced him to Dheya, then watched triumphantly. For a moment the reporter was startled, as he stared at the Eyes. Then he smiled knowingly.

"Well, well! May I see them closer?" He stepped forward, but the Eyes backed quickly away. The reporter glanced at the ceiling as though looking for trick strings or other devices.

"Dheya is disguised," Higgins explained hurriedly. "There are certain reasons why—"

"I thought so." The reporter still smiled. "Okay, doc, how do you do it? With mirrors? Sure, I admit it's good! Plenty good!"

With an effort Higgins kept his temper. "Dheya, tell him the story."

Dheya obliged. He recounted all that he'd told Higgins, and more. He described the cities and canals and customs of Mars. He told of Martian history, science, tradition. He described their trip through space to Earth.

"This gets better and better!" the young man exclaimed. "Ventriloquism too! Higgins, I swear I could hardly see your lips move."

"But it's true, I tell you! Everything that Dheya said is true."

"Oh, come now. I can pick up all of that stuff at any news-stand. Confess, Higgins. You've been reading the science-fiction magazines, haven't you?"

Higgins admitted that he read them regularly.

"I thought so. Read them occasionally myself. You've prepared your story well, but just what is the angle? If

you're going to try and pull another Orson Welles, I don't think it'll go."

Higgins sighed. "All right, Dheya. Read his mind for him."

Again Dheya obliged. When he had finished, the reporter was really impressed. But he was looking at Higgins and not the Eyes. "Optical illusion, ventriloquism, mind-reading!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Higgins, look—I can get you three weeks booking at the Orpheum as a starter, and then—"

Higgins gave up. "I'm not interested in any theatrical ventures, young man. I'll bid you good day now."

"Well, you're passing up a good bet! Frankly I don't think you'll ever put across this Man from Mars gag. Tell you what, though—I think I can get you a front page play." And as he left he glanced again at the Eyes, said, "What are those things made of, some sort of plastic? They're good—really good."

"We're not licked yet," Higgins said. "The scientists will believe. I'll call some of them at the University."

"No, Peter." The Eyes were sad and thoughtful. "It doesn't matter, really. Our Elders were right. This Earth venture should never have been attempted. Peter... I must return to Mars! I think there is a way, if you will help me!"

"Can't say that I blame you. But how? It would take a million dollars to build a space-ship! Our scientists are close to solving the problem, but as yet—"

"There is possibly another way. I should have thought of it before! If I can assemble the proper instruments, I believe I can build a device by which to *communicate telepathetically with Mars!* Then they will send a ship for me. They could land in a secret place and no one need know."

Dheya went on to describe what he would need. Tubes of certain design. A few chemicals. Special tools. Enough

platinum for the coils that would carry the terrific current. Most of it went over Higgins' head, but not the platinum.

"How much platinum would you need?"

Dheya made careful estimation. Higgins groaned when he heard the figure. "It has to be platinum? Nothing else would do?"

"Absolutely not. I must create a beam of such tremendous potential that it will bridge the gap to Mars. Only platinum will resist the chemical action. Only platinum has the high electrical resistance that will be necessary in these coils—" Dheya paused, noting Higgins' expression. "You do not have platinum on your world?"

"Yes. But it's very rare and expensive. As a matter of fact this entire apparatus would cost more thousands of dollars than I can raise."

The Eyes looked so crestfallen that Higgins added, "But I'll get it! May take a little time, but I promise you—you'll have your apparatus."

Higgins lay awake most of that night wondering how he was going to do it.

Next day's paper had the interview—on the front page, too, as the reporter had promised. He had written up the "Mars" angle in amusing style, but ended the article in more serious vein, extolling Higgins' remarkable "ventriloquistic and mind-reading act." Higgins threw the paper down in disgust.

The article was to stand him in good stead, nevertheless. That very morning he had another visitor. This time it was a little fat man with a big fat cigar, who introduced himself as Harry Gensler, booking agent, publicity man, general promoter. He had a copy of the paper.

"If you're as good as this write-up says, I think I can put you over in a big way!"

"Put me over?"

"Yeah. Get you bookings. Make money! Wasn't that the whole idea behind this scheme?"

Higgins' mind leaped. He said, "How much money?"

"Well, Mr. Higgins, that can be discussed later. After you've—ah—given me a demonstration."

"Wait here!" He went to get Dheya who was in the other room eating oranges.

Gensler's own eyes bulged when he saw the Eyes. This time Dheya stayed a good distance away as they put on the act, Dheya recounting a few facts about Mars and demonstrating his mind-reading.

Gensler tried to keep down his excitement. "It's—it's good," he admitted. "Mind-reading acts are corny, but you've got something new here with the ventriloquism and the Mars angle. Keep that in! The public will go for it."

"How much money?" Higgins kept to the point.

"Well, let's try you out for, say, a week in Seattle to see how you go over. Shall we say one hundred to start, and double that if you're a hit?"

"No. We shall say two hundred to start, then double that." But it wasn't Higgins who spoke! It was Dheya!

"You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Higgins," Gensler gulped. But he nearly broke his arm reaching for his fountain-pen.

Higgins signed the contract. When Gensler had gone, Higgins did a little dance. "Dheya," he said, "you drive a hard bargain! I'm going right out and buy you five dozen oranges!"

Billed as "Professor Higgins and His Amazing Martian," the act was an instant hit. It was startling and different. The routine was for Higgins to interview Dheya, his "supposed" Martian, on the subject of Mars, space-travel, his thrilling visit to Earth, and so on. The public took it as a new and novel form of science-fiction! Then came the mind-reading routine, and they finished with the orange-peeling act which really baffled the audience!

The trial in Seattle extended to four weeks. At the end of that time they were able to buy most of the apparatus Dheya needed for his signals to Mars. They hid it away in Higgins' house where it would be quite safe with Martha. But there was still the greater problem—platinum. According to Dheya they would need quite a lot of it.

Now Gensler was booking far in advance and getting fabulous offers. They made a swing down the Coast and then jumped East. Gensler stayed with them as business manager and publicity man.

Higgins didn't like the man—didn't quite trust him, in fact—but he supposed he couldn't complain now! In two months they had shoved the swoon crooners right out of the theatrical headlines. The money was rolling in.

And beyond living expenses, Higgins was putting every cent of their earnings into platinum. He bought up all he could lay hands on. It wasn't easy! Anxiously they watched the hoard grow. And at last, Dheya hazarded a guess that within another two weeks they would have enough.

They were playing Chicago, to capacity houses, when the trouble started. Dheya decided one day not to go on. He complained of being tired, physically and mentally.

"We *have* been going at a terrific pace," Higgins agreed, "and you're doing most of the work. Guess it's time to slow down a little." He tried to phone Gensler, but couldn't reach him.

Gensler reached Higgins soon enough, when the latter failed to show up for the matinee. He came to Higgins' hotel and he was furious.

"It's just that we're tired," Higgins explained calmly. "After all, we're not used to this pace."

Dheya had retired discreetly to another room, as was his habit when others than Higgins were around.

"But we're booked, man!" Gensler cried. "Booked solid! You just can't do this sort of thing in show business."

Higgins was regretful but adamant. "If Dheya doesn't want to go on, I can't."

"Dheya! Dheya! You always talk about those damned trick eyes as if—" Gensler sputtered, trying to regain his temper. "All right. All right. I suppose you need that trick device in some way for the mind-reading. The truth of it is that *you* don't want to go on. Right?"

"Leave it at that."

Gensler's eyes narrowed. "I thought we'd been doing all right. But if it's a matter of more money . . ."

"No—it isn't that."

"But tomorrow! What about tomorrow?"

"We—I'll try to make it. Yes, I think I can make it. At least I'll let you know."

The next day Dheya claimed he was feeling better, but Higgins thought he was lying. Anyway the act went on without a hitch. They finished the rest of the week all right, but on Saturday things again started happening.

On the morning of that eventful day Gensler came to Higgins waving a telegram.

"Hollywood! They want you for a picture, Higgins—maybe more than one! Anyway this offer makes it worth while cancelling the rest of the tour. We'll have to leave Monday."

Higgins thought that was fine.

But at the matinee Dheya faltered in the middle of the act. Higgins could tell something was wrong, and cut it short. Back at their hotel he and Dheya talked it over and decided they might as well discontinue the act for good. Dheya explained then, for the first time. Earth's gravity was considerably heavier than Mars, and the past weeks had been a terrific strain.

"I'm a dunce!" Higgins exclaimed. "From all the science-fiction I've read, I should have realized that! But Dheya . . . What about the platinum? Think we have enough?"

They brought out the strong metal box which they kept

always hidden, and Dheya looked at their hoarded metal once more. "There will be enough. I will make it do."

Higgins phoned Gensler then, and told him that everything was off including the Hollywood deal. As expected, Gensler ran the gamut from pleading and cajoling, all the way to dire threats of criminal prosecution for breach of contract.

"You've made a fortune out of this deal," Higgins told him coldly. "But now I've had enough." He hung up the phone.

Later in the evening the buzzer rang. Thinking it was Gensler at the door, Higgins set his lips tight and went to open it. Two men in dark suits, with hats pulled down, thrust their way in. One of them had his right hand in his coat pocket.

"And in case you don't think it's real," he said, "take a look!" He pulled out a blue-steel automatic. "Back. Back in the room, bud. Shut that door, Joe."

Joe shut the door, and stood grinning. The man with the gun came forward. The gun got playful with the third button on Higgins' vest. "All right, bud, where is it? You know what we came for."

"No I don't," Higgins stammered. "What—what do you men want?"

"The box, the box! The little tin box with the stuff in it. The platinum!"

Higgins blanched. Could Gensler be behind this? He might have known about the platinum investments. Now Higgins realized how stupid he had been for not putting the precious metal in a bank vault somewhere! If these men got their hands on it, there would go Dheya's chances of returning to Mars!

The man by the door said, "Hey, Mike, this is the guy that has the magic act down at the Palace! I caught the act last week. It's pretty good!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Mike grinned. "Professor Higgins and his Amazing Martian. Can you imagine a guy

sinking all his dough in platinum?" He jabbed harder with the gun. "All right, *Professor*, where is it?"

"I—I don't keep it here!"

"Look, we're not amateurs! It's our business to know these things! All right, Joe, get started. Tear the place apart."

Joe came forward, and just then the Eyes appeared in the doorway of the next room. Now they were swirling with an angry red.

"Hey, look," Joe said, "there's that trick Martian. Now I can find out how that stunt is worked. Wires and mirrors, I bet! I always was a sucker for these magic tricks." He walked over to the Eyes, reached out a hand.

Then he gave a cry of horror. He jerked his hand away, staggered back. "I touched something—awful!" But now the Eyes were sweeping toward him. The man's arms were suddenly pinioned to his sides, and his feet left the floor! He seemed to be hanging in space. His features turned purple.

"Mike, help!" he gurled. "It's got me—by the throat! I can't..."

Mike's eyes were distended in horror. Forgetting Higgins, he leaped forward to help his companion. Higgins thrust out a foot and Mike crashed to the floor. Higgins pounced on him, wrenched the gun from his limp hand. Mike gave one last horrified look at his pal suspended in space, then fled for the door, wrenched it open and was gone.

"Dheya!" Higgins cried. "Dheya, that's enough!"

Slowly the red of anger left Dheya's eyes. He dropped the man, who moaned a little and rubbed the livid, bluish welt on his throat. He managed to get to his feet at last and stagger out the door. Higgins let him go.

"Thanks, Dheya. I don't think they'll be back—ever! Anyway I have the gun, if they do."

Higgins slept with the gun under his pillow that night. He woke in the morning refreshed and happy, especially

happy now that they were through with the mad whirl. They'd accomplished their purpose, they had the platinum Dheya needed. Now he could return to his little farm and Martha, whom he had missed.

He went to waken Dheya. The Martian was gone.

Strange! Never in all their tour had Dheya left him for an instant. With a strange foreboding, Higgins hurried to one of the trunks. He opened the secret compartment where he'd always kept the box of platinum. It, too, was gone.

After his initial panic, Higgins tried to reason it out. Of one thing he was sure: there had been no other visitors in the night. But why would Dheya leave him? He was sure the Martian would never do so voluntarily! Had he left the hotel for some reason, then been kidnapped? Impossible as this seemed, Higgins could think of nothing else once it occurred to him.

He went to the police, to the Missing Persons Bureau. The official there recognized him, listened to his story.

"Dheya," the official said, staring at him. "You mean, of course, your—ah—'Martian.'" He pronounced the word with quotes around it. "But surely you realize, Professor Higgins, that this is hardly in *our* department. What you should do is report your loss to the Robbery Detail! I sympathize. That must have been a valuable piece of equipment!"

Higgins' mind was in turmoil. He finally contacted the proper department and gave them the whole story, including descriptions of the two gunmen, and Gensler as well.

The detective captain put a couple of men on the case and promised to keep Higgins informed.

Higgins returned to the hotel and spent the rest of the day in anxious waiting. He didn't realize until now how fond he had become of the Eyes! By evening there was still no news. Even if Dheya had wandered away for some reason and become lost, he should be hearing about it by now! He thought desperately of calling in the FBI.

He spent a sleepless night, and on noon of the next day he received a telegram. It was from Martha!

DHEYA IS HERE. EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT. BUT COME AT ONCE.

He made arrangements for passage on the next plane to Seattle. Upon arriving home he greeted Martha anxiously.

"Dheya came back here? Is he all right? Did he bring the platinum?"

"Yes, he's all right. Yes, he brought the metal, and he's set up the apparatus already."

"But why, why?" Higgins asked, trying to hide his hurt. "I mean why should he leave me that way? I—I didn't do something to offend him, did I?"

"No, dear. You'll understand—soon."

"All right. Where is he now? I want to see him!"

"He's down there in the ravine where you found him. That's where he's signalling from. I think he's already made contact with his people."

They hurried to the ravine. There in the cabin Higgins saw Dheya, apparently seated at the table on which a complicated instrument rested. There were dials and curious platinum coils and huge tubes aglow with an unearthly radiance. A strangely shaped helmet apparently encased Dheya's head. The Eyes just below it were half closed now, unmoving.

Martha placed a finger to her lips and whispered, "You mustn't speak to him! The poor thing's been sitting that way for hours; I think it's some sort of trance."

"He's all right. He's in telepathic communication."

"How long will it take for the spaceship to get here?"

"Lord only knows! Not more than three days, from what Dheya told me."

"Anyway," Martha said, "we mustn't leave him. We'll sleep here. I'll go back to the house and make up some sandwiches and things."

Peter agreed, surprised at Martha's seeming attachment to the Martian.

For nearly thirty hours Dheya remained there in the trance-like state. At last the Eyes opened wide, the helmet came off and he rose.

"They are coming," he announced, "with all possible speed! Already they are a third of the way. It has been a strain, but I'm sure I can contact them now from time to time."

"You poor thing," Martha said. "At least you must eat something!" She gave him oranges and other fruits which Dheya consumed gratefully.

"Don't you want to sleep a little?" Higgins suggested. "We'll waken you in time."

"No, Peter, I mustn't take that chance. When they come closer to Earth I must keep in contact with them—guide them to this spot."

Dheya donned the helmet again, the Eyes half closed. For the rest of that day they waited, and through the night and into the next day. Martha and Peter took turns sleeping and watching, but Dheya never slept. Occasionally he'd remove the helmet and move about the cabin, but he never once lost sight of the precious equipment. And finally, as dusk of the third day was coming on, he announced:

"They should arrive some time tonight. I must stay in contact with them now."

The hours passed. Higgins felt a rising excitement. He was outside constantly, in the little wooded ravine, scanning the dark sky. Would the ship be rocket-powered, he wondered? From what Dheya had told him he doubted it.

At last—it must have been hours past midnight—he saw it! At least he thought he did. He really must have heard it first, a faint humming from far overhead that grew steadily louder. Yes! There it was at last, a great dark shadow coming swiftly down, perhaps fifty yards away!

He made it out to be conical in shape. Then, as it neared the tops of the trees, a wide circle of bluish light flashed

on and off several times from the flat base of the cone. Gracefully as a feather it landed in a little grove between the trees.

Higgins hurried inside. Dheya was removing the helmet. He smashed it beyond recognition, and did the same to the rest of the apparatus.

"This is best," he said. "But you still have the platinum, Peter; you deserve that, for all you've done for me."

Somehow Peter didn't care about the platinum. He felt all choked up. This was goodbye and he realized he was going to miss Dheya.

There were tears in Martha's eyes, too. She stepped toward Dheya. Peter thought she was patting the Martian's shoulder or shaking its hand or something, and she wasn't squeamish about it. She said something that Peter couldn't hear. But if ever he saw a smile in a pair of eyes, he saw one in Dheya's.

"Goodbye, Peter. Goodbye, Martha. I shall always, always remember you and your kindness!" Then Dheya was gone, hurrying toward the spaceship and his own people. A door in the hull opened, spilling a little patch of light. Then it closed.

The spaceship lifted slowly, gathered speed, then disappeared as a dark shadow in the sky.

For a long time Peter Higgins looked at the sky before he spoke.

"I'm going to miss Dheya. I was getting downright fond of him. But I'm glad we didn't see the others. I'll want to remember the Martians only as—the Eyes. The way I knew Dheya."

"Yes," Martha was smiling. "And now that he's gone, I can tell you whey he came back here so hurriedly."

"That's right! What about that?"

"You see, it's just that Dheya *had* to contact his people, and quickly! It was urgent that he get back to Mars. More urgent than you can imagine. Dheya came here to me because—I would understand, and could help."

Peter shook his head, still puzzled.

"Don't you remember," Martha went on, "that Dheya's full name was Dheya-Raj? And the other—who was killed when their ship crashed—was *Lhotu-Raj!* Yes, Dheya hurried to me because she knew I would understand, as only a woman can understand . . ."

"She!" Then it hit Peter all at once.

"Of course. Dheya is a she, not a he. Furthermore, there is going to be a junior-Raj. Now you can understand her urgency to get back to Mars. How she must have suffered knowing what might happen if her child were born here . . ."

Peter was stunned, but gradually his mind accepted the fact. Then he remembered something.

"Martha, what was it you said to Dheya just before he—I mean she—left? It seemed to please her!"

"Yes, I think it did!" Martha smiled softly. "I just told her that if it were a girl, I hoped she'd name it after me. And if a boy, after you!"

* * * * *

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FOOTPRINTS

BY ROBERT ERNEST GILBERT

From *The Harrison City Times*, June 21:

Huge "Footprints" Frightens Fisherman

An excited fisherman, identifying himself as James Englert of Rochester, N. Y., brought Constable Fred McClain to investigate mysterious footprints along Indian Creek this morning.

Described by Englert as being human and "at least three feet long," the footprints, Constable McClain revealed, were "some holes made with a shovel in the sand."

From *Southern Agriculture Magazine*, June:

"King Superior," the Belgian stallion in the picture above, is claimed by his owner, A. J. Pickett of Indian Creek, Tennessee, to be the biggest horse on earth. "King Superior" stands 18 hands at the shoulder and weighs a record 3,600 pounds.

From a letter by James Englert to his wife, June 22:

... And, Laura, something else happened that I can't forget. I was almost arrested for public drunkenness! I'll admit I did have a drop or two, but who wouldn't after what I saw. I didn't tell you about this yesterday, because I was afraid you'd think I'd gone crazy all by myself down here the East Tennessee mountains.

I've been fishing on some land owned by a Mr. A. J.

Pickett. He has the best looking farm I've seen down here. Even his barn is painted!

As I was saying, I went fishing up a stream called Indian Creek yesterday, but I didn't catch anything because of what I saw in the sand. There were four big holes about three feet long and a foot wide. They were at least ten feet apart, and they looked like the prints of big flat feet. I could even make out the toes on one of them—I think.

I really shouldn't have gone to the police, but you know what an imagination I have. Those holes scared me, especially after I heard something heavy walking in the woods. I went to Harrison City and told a man named McClain—he's a sheriff or a constable or something—about what I had seen. He came back with me and—someone had dug around those holes with a spade! They didn't look like footprints now! That's when McClain started smelling my breath and wanted to arrest me.

Oh, well, call it a story. I may have been dreaming. Two more days, and I'll catch the train back to good old New York.

From *The Harrison City Times*, June 22:

Historic Hotel to be Razed

Older residents of Claymore County mourned the passing of the Valley Springs Hotel today. A popular health resort at the turn of the century, the building had stood abandoned on the farm of A. J. Pickett at Indian Creek.

Mr. Pickett said he had sold the hotel to Guy Kyle, also of Indian Creek, who will use the lumber for building purposes.

The Valley Springs resort was closed in 1916 when the mineral water springs were said to have become polluted.

A letter by Laura Englert:

Marshall Apts.
Court Street
Rochester, New York
June 30

D. D. Rutledge, Chief of Police
Harrison City, Tenn.

Dear Sir:

Here is a better description of my husband than I gave you in my telegram. He is six feet, one inch tall. He weighs about one hundred and seventy pounds. He has brown hair and brown eyes. There is a large mole on his left shoulder. There is a small scar on his left leg caused by a fish hook. He is thirty-one years of age. He was probably wearing his new tan Tropicool suit when he went to catch the train, if he did.

Your wire and letter encouraged me some. He wrote me that he would catch the train on the twenty-fifth. That was the last letter I received from him. It was dated June 22. He should have been home three days ago even if there was some delay. I have written to the railroad and other places. They have not been able to help me. I am afraid something has happened to him down there in those mountains. They are not having any feuds near there, are they?

Please keep me informed. I will send you any other information that will help, if I think of any.

Yours truly
Mrs. James Englert

From a letter by A. J. Pickett to his son, June 30:

... There's some bad news, too. You maybe recollect Guy Kyle that lived up the road on the old Smith place. He was buried today and I feel mighty bad about it. He was tearing down the old hotel and the roof fell in on him. I reckon I never wrote you about that. I sold Guy the

building. It was just in the way. I figured I could clear out all that brush and weeds and use the land for pasture. Guy wanted the lumber for a new tobacco barn. I told him to be careful, but he kept working till dark Monday night. I don't know what he did, but the roof come down. I don't see how it ever mashed him up like that. It made me think of when Will Scism got blowed up working on the railroad.

Constable McClain was out here this morning asking about that feller from New York that was here fishing. Seems he hasn't got home yet and his wife thinks something's wrong. More things seem to be happening right now.

Your mother and I will be looking for you in for the fourth. She said to tell you . . .

From *The Harrison City Times*, July 2:

Aerialists, Animals, Freaks to Thrill You July 4

. . . Of particular interest to Claymore County residents will be Jumbo Jack, eight foot four inch giant, who has been seen by millions in his ten years with the carnival. Jumbo Jack's real name is John Bradshaw. He grew up to his eight feet four inches a few miles from Indian Creek . . .

From *Chemistry of the Body* by Hansel Schneider, M. D.:

. . . Another of the ductless glands, the thyroid, produces a hormone containing large amounts of iodine, an element relatively scarce in nature and usually produced commercially from the ashes of burned seaweed or as a by-product in the crystallization process of potassium nitrate or saltpeter. The concentration of iodine in the thyroid determines the rate of growth of this gland as does the action of the pre-pituitary, a lobe of the pituitary gland.

These three ductless glands, the adrenal, the pituitary and the thyroid, seem to regulate the time at which the

process of growth in the body as a whole ceases. Growth in height stops when the cartilage at the bone ends becomes bone itself, so that the cartilage cells no longer multiply . . .

From *Historic East Tennessee* by Kenneth M. Pulham:

. . . When the Cherokees had been driven off a third time, it was discovered that the supply of powder in the fort was almost exhausted. A party of six men, led by Amos Crawford, walked eight miles by night to the caves at the headwaters of Indian Creek. Standing knee-deep in water, and working by the light of pine torches, Crawford and his men scraped saltpeter crystals from the limestone walls of the caves. The next night, they evaded the Indians and returned to the fort where the saltpeter was used in the manufacture of a fresh supply of gunpowder . . .

A letter by D. D. Rutledge:

Department of Police
Harrison City, Tennessee
July 6

Mrs. James Englert
Marshall Apts.
Court Street
Rochester, N. Y.

Dear Mrs. Englert:

I regret to report that your husband has not been located here in Harrison City or in Claymore County. I am writing to give you all the information which I have obtained.

Mr. Englert's luggage is being held at the Pine Tree Tourist Cabins where he has not been seen since June 23. Mr. E. B. Blaine, the manager, claims a bill of \$28.00 is owed him.

Mr. A. J. Pickett says that Mr. Englert stopped at his house on the morning of June 23 and said he would like

to fish some more. Mr. Pickett says he gave his permission and that he has not seen Mr. Englert since then.

Mr. Englert had a curious experience on June 21 while fishing. I am enclosing a clipping about it from the local newspaper, but doubt that it has any bearing on his disappearance.

A check at the railroad station failed to reveal whether or not Mr. Englert recently took a train.

My information gives no hint of any foul play or other explanations for Mr. Englert's disappearance. I will inform you of any future developments.

Yours truly

D. D. Rutledge
Chief of Police

A theme by Billy Bradshaw, July 6:

My Brother

My brother Calvin is the most big man there is. He is bigger than my other brother. My other brother is named Jumbo Jack. Many peopple saw him in the show on the 4th of July.

My brother Calvin is 18 foot and six inches tall. He is strong. We do not use horses. My brother pulls the plow.

My father had my brother lay down. He masured him with a ruler. I am proud of my brother. No body has as big a brother as I has.

Billy Bradshaw, 2 A English
Indian Creek Grammar School

A note by Moses E Bradshaw, July 8:

Dear Prof. Mitchell
Indian Creek School

Please excuse Billy for being absent yesterdav. He had a accedent and hurt hisself so he could not hardly set down. If you can not teach him nothing but to write stuff like that piece about his bruther which he don't have and

you give him B-- on it. I am about to stop sending him to summer school as it don't seem worth the money and trouble for him to be learnt to write fairy stories. He can just stay ignerant.

Yrs.

Moses E. Bradshaw
Billy's father

From *The Harrison City Times*, July 8

\$10,000 HORSE STOLEN
County Officers Investigate

County officials today investigated the theft of "King Superior," a Belgian stallion owned by A. J. Pickett of Indian Creek and valued at \$10,000.

Pickett discovered that the horse was missing this morning when he found the barn doors torn open and the stall empty. The lock on the stall door had been wrenched off. Pickett said that neither he nor his family had heard any noises during the night, but that a collie watchdog was found killed by a blow on the head.

Constable Fred McClain, heading the investigation, said important developments were expected within the next twenty-four hours. McClain compared the crime with the still unsolved stealing of four head of cattle from the Tom Sneed farm over a month ago.

From the Minutes of the July 11 Meeting of the Harrison City Ornithology Club:

... The less well-known birds of the twenty-three species identified on the field trip to Indian Creek were the cedar waxwing, mountain solitary vireo, chestnut-sided warbler, white-throated sparrow, and indigo bunting. A pair of large birds observed drinking from one of the springs near the old Valley Springs Hotel, were not identified. In color and markings, they resembled English sparrows but were almost as large as crows. It was believed they were a species of hawk...

A letter by D. D. Rutledge:

Department of Police
Harrison City, Tenn.
July 12

Special Investigator Andrew Young
Police Headquarters
Boonetown, Tennessee

Dear Andy,

If you would do one more favor for an old buddy, please drop by here some day when you are in town. Everything around here is unsolved. Constable McClain asked me to write you. He brought in a plaster cast last week, and no one here knows what it is. We want you to tell us. McClain said to call you long distance, but it is bad enough to write about this without saying it over the telephone. We are keeping it out of the papers.

I guess you heard about A. J. Pickett's prize stallion being stolen. McClain made this cast over there of a hole he saw in the soft ground near the creek. The strange thing is that the cast is shaped like a man's foot except for being thirty-five inches long and thirteen inches wide. It has five imprints at the wide end like toes. McClain pointed this out. We would have laughed at him if it had not been for that tourist who took McClain down to Indian Creek several weeks ago to show him some footprints three feet long.

He was a man named Englert from Rochester, N. Y., and he has turned up missing. His wife calls or wires me every day, wanting to know why I do not find her husband. I have done all I can to find him, but she says she is coming down here. I believe she has contacted the F. B. I. I thought at first he had just run out on her. Now I am not so sure.

Everything seems to center around A. J. Pickett's farm. First Englert goes fishing down there and sees what he says are big footprints. Then he goes fishing again, and

has not been seen since. A few days later, a man starts tearing down the old Valley Springs Hotel, and the roof falls and kills him. Then somebody kills Pickett's dog and steals his horse. McClain has been telling me about all the stock that has been stolen in that section in the past few years. Not a one of them has ever been traced or found. He suspects some Bradshaws who live up the creek, but he can prove nothing. It makes me think we are living in the Wild West.

I am beginning to think there is something queer about the Pickett place. I went down there with McClain, even though it is outside my jurisdiction. I never saw anything like those old mineral water springs. The weeds around them are higher than my head. Some of the trees look big enough to be redwoods. I saw grasshoppers as long as my hand. Pickett's stallion always looked odd to me. He was too big to be natural.

I have probably said enough about all of this, Andy. You will be thinking I've gone off my rocker. I just wanted to ask you to drop by and look at the cast and did not mean to get long winded. We will be looking for you.

Yours truly

D. D.

From *The Harrison City Times*, July 13:

Highjackers Elude Police

No further clues have been uncovered in the highjacking of a Tennessee Transfer Co. truck on the Harrison City-Boonetown Highway last Monday night, according to Highway Patrol Sergeant Paul Hancock.

A man held on suspicion was released today when extensive questioning showed he had no connection with the crime.

Sergeant Hancock said, "I don't see how a six-wheel truck-and-trailer could completely vanish

off the map." A report that the truck had been found in Asheville, N. C. proved false.

From *The Harrison City Times*, July 14:

FISHING TACKLE OF MISSING TOURIST FOUND

Identified by Wife

A fly rod and tackle box, identified by Mrs. James Englert of Rochester, N. Y. as belonging to her husband, missing since June 23, was found near Indian Creek yesterday by stockbreeder A. J. Pickett. When shown the equipment at police headquarters, lovely brunette Mrs. Englert exclaimed, "That belongs to Jimmy! I would know it anywhere."

Police Chief D. D. Rutledge told reporters the search for the missing man was expected to bring results within the next forty-eight hours.

James Englert, his wife revealed, is assistant manager of the Metzger Wholesale Co. of Rochester. Mrs. Englert first became alarmed when her husband did not return from his vacation in Claymore County as scheduled. She flew here from Rochester to aid in the county-wide search.

An unsigned, undated letter:

Dear Laura,

I'll hide this under the cot and hope it will be found. The kid, who says his name is Billy, slipped me the paper and pencil. He doesn't seem as bad as the others. Maybe it's because he's so young. He says he is ten, but he is big enough to be eighteen. They're all big. The man's name is Moses Bradshaw. I heard the old woman call him that.

I better hurry. I may not have much time. I don't know how long I've been here. About three weeks—I think. I'm locked in a log shed somewhere in these

mountains. I don't know where. I was blindfolded. They've been feeding me better recently. Bradshaw said it was horse meat, worth three dollars a pound on the hoof. That may be his idea of a joke. I eat it regardless. He said Calvin liked horse meat.

They've stolen a big truck to put Calvin in when they move. Bradshaw said it isn't safe for them to stay here any longer, because the police are searching the woods for me.

I don't want to alarm you, Laura, but I'm beginning to think they won't take me with them. Bradshaw has threatened to kill me several times. Billy told me he had Calvin kill a man tearing down the old hotel. Billy claims the mineral water from the springs made them so big. Bradshaw looks capable of murder. He's dirty and has a beard. He is the first man I have seen who looks as I expected the Tennessee mountaineers to look.

Those footprints I saw were real, Laura, or else I have gone crazy. Tell someone about the mineral springs. They're dangerous. Animals are drinking the water. Bradshaw killed a rattle snake big as a python. Calvin—I think he is Moses Bradshaw's son—is about eighteen feet tall. He was among the trees along the creek. When I saw him, I couldn't move. He picked me up and Bradshaw came out of the bushes and blindfolded me. Calvin carried me under one arm.

Billy said Bradshaw doesn't want anyone to know about Calvin. He wanted to keep everyone away from the springs but now has given up the idea.

I can hear the engine of the truck outside. They've been packing all morning.

I've been thinking of you all the time, Laura. I should never have gone on a vacation without you. Remember that I love you, and I_____

SONGS of the SPACEWAYS

POETRY EDITOR: LILITH LORRAINE.

Please submit all material for this page direct to Lilith Lorraine, Calle Andrea del Castagno, No. 16, Mixcoac, Mexico, D. F.

PIRATE'S RETURN

Yes, we are back from the gold-green star,
That circles the leopard sun,
And what are our spoils from the cosmic war?
Not one... not one... not one.
For something howled when the night-birds flew,
And fought like wolves... but their feet were two.

Yes, there were jewels of opal fire,
Dead cities like broken dreams,
But a red mist covered that world entire,
Shrouding the hills and streams,
And something fought for our fallen crumbs,
And crawled like worms... but their hands had thumbs.

Yes, we are men of the stars, hard-schooled
In the laws of the pirate-pack—
But something came out of the caves and mewled...
“Go back! Go back! Go back!”
And we turned and fled from the vampire curse
That must never be loosed on the universe.

—Michael Wolf

JOURNEY TO BARKUT

BY MURRAY LEINSTER

(Part Two)

SYNOPSIS: Meek Tony Gregg finds his lucky charm is really a coin of Barkut, fabulous Arabesque world of djinns, and magic. Guided by the coin Gregg travels to Africa, thence to Barkut, and, arriving in that country's capital, is imprisoned on suspicion of being a djinn.

THREE WEEKS LATER, in mid-morning, Tony sat comfortably in the shady part of the courtyard and looked more or less dreamily at the slave-girl Ghail's legs. She had nice legs, and a lot of them was on display. They were slim, as a girl's legs ought to be, and they tapered nicely to the knees, and then they flared just the right amount at just the right place below them, and went down to very nice ankles, and below them to small bare feet—very dusty at the moment—one of which tapped ominously on the floor of the courtyard. He was still kept behind a locked iron grate, technically imprisoned, and his conscience had had a swell time pointing out to him how completely irresponsible and hair-brained and half-witted all his actions had been. He was, however, unworried except over the reaction that tapping foot might presage.

At first, of course, he'd been totally unable to speak Arabic, and nobody in Barkut seemed able to speak English. He'd tried to communicate from his original prison cell with the help of a dog-eared guide-book he'd picked up second-hand in Suez. The vocabulary it offered was limited. It gave the phrases for complaining that prices were too high, that the food was overripe, and that the

speaker wanted to go back to his hotel. But in Barkut Tony had been charged nothing, the food was good if monotonous—but fresh ripe dates were a revelation to him—and he was in jail and had no hotel. After two days of this unsatisfactory conversation, he'd been moved to a convenient cell-and-courtyard in the palace. He'd been inspected by various whiskered people he thought were officials, and then the slave-girl, Ghail, appeared and resolutely set to work to teach him to talk.

That was the way she undoubtedly looked at it. Tony was presumably an adult male, but he babbled only a few Arabic words, and those with a vile accent. The slave-girl settled down to the job with something like a scowl. She was long-legged and lissome and had an air of firm competence, and he knew she was a slave-girl because married woman and the marriageable daughters of citizens walked the streets—if at all—only when swathed in voluminous robes and with veils which complied with the strictest of Moslem traditions. This girl Ghail was not swathed to speak of, and she was not veiled at all, and she was distinctly pretty and very far from shapeless. But she regarded Tony with a scowling dispagement which made him work earnestly to learn to carry on a conversation.

Matters had progressed nicely in three weeks, and Tony found himself possessed of a talent for languages. But now she tapped her foot ominously on the floor of his comfortable prison. She said in measured calm:

“Now, just what do you mean by that?”

“I wanted to know.”

Tony spoke apologetically. But he was pleased with the fluency he displayed in the Arabic she had taught him.

“And just why did you want to know the name of my owner and the value in money that is placed upon me?” demanded the girl.

“Sooner or later,” explained Tony, trying hard to be convincing, “I shall be questioned by the rulers of this

place. I think that is why you have been sent to teach me the language. When I am questioned and can explain myself, I shall become high in favor and rich. It was my thought that then—Allah permitting—I would purchase you from your owner."

The slave-girl's foot tapped more forbiddingly still.

"And for what purpose," she demanded icily, "would you wish to purchase me?"

Tony looked at her in pained astonishment. His conscience mentioned acidly that this conversation was not only improper but indiscreet. A brisk young executive would never——. To which Tony replied that he would not have much fun, then. When his conscience began a heated rejoinder, he cut it short.

"Truly," said Tony in false piety, "someone has undoubtedly said that the desires of a man's heart are many, but that if there is not one woman more desirable than all else, he is not human."

His Arabic was still sketchy, but he put it over. The girl's eyes, surprisingly, burned.

"You are human?" she demanded skeptically.

"All too human," admitted Tony, "What else?"

She stood up in queenly indignation. Then she smiled, but scornfully, like someone speaking to a half-wit or worse.

"You came across the desert from the sea," she said tolerantly, "riding one camel and leading two others. But an hour before your coming, one of the watchers on the city wall had seen a *djinn* in the desert.. When you came, so stupid that you could not even speak the language of humans, do you think we did not know you for what you are—a *djinn*?"

"A *djinn*?" said Tony blankly. The word was one of the very few—alcohol was another—which would be the same in Arabic and English. "Do you mean those creatures of the Thousand and One Nights?"

"Of history—yes." Ghail's tone was bitingly scornful.

"And if we had doubted, within the hour there came a Bedawin to the city gate, a one-eyed man with a sword-slit nose, who told us of your taking the form of a bale of rich silk, torn open upon the beach of the sea. When he and his companions alighted from their camels to gather up the wealth, you changed instantly to the likeness of a young man strangely garbed and ran swiftly to their camels and flogged them away faster than the men could follow. The man demanded his camels, and they were those you brought to the gates of the city. So they were yielded to him. Do you deny now that you are of the *djinn*?"

Tony swallowed.

"A one-eyed man with a sword-slit nose?" That was the man he had had to kill, back at the seashore. He'd been trying hard not to remember him, though if he'd ever had to pick out anybody on looks alone to be worked over with a scimitar, that man would have been the one. But he could not have come and demanded camels! It was not possible! Tony had left him a very messy object on the sand, and had chased his two companions with the scimitar. He swallowed again, very pale.

"You could not speak our human language," Ghail continued tolerantly. "So I taught it to you. We hoped to make a bargain with you, because some of you *djinn* are willing to be traitors to your race. Perhaps you are ready to make such a bargain. But it is insolence for one of the *djinn* to think of purchasing a human slave!"

Even Tony's conscience was stunned now.

"L-look!" he said desperately. "In my world, *djinns* are fables! What do they look like?"

"When the watcher on the city wall saw you on the desert," the slave-girl told him in patent scorn, "you had the form of a whirlwind. Why not? Is not that the way in which you travel?"

Tony swallowed yet again. His conscience had made a quick recovery. Now it began to say something piously

satisfied about now look what a jam he'd gotten himself into,, actually thinking romantic thoughts about an idiot girl who believed in imaginary creatures like *djinns* and *efreets!* But Tony shut it up. He saw implications of the theory of multiple worlds that he hadn't realized before. What is true in one world is not necessarily true in another. What is false in one world, also, is not invariably false in another. Actually, if there are enough worlds, anything must be true somewhere. Anything!

And he remembered—and flinched at remembering—his impression of a huge, vaporous, open-mouthed face which had been looking down at him in the small boat when he waked on the shore. He remembered the sand-devil, the whirlwind, which had looked like dark smoke in spite of the fact that it was whirling over white sand. It had kept pace with him as he went to meet the Bedawin and have them attempt to kill him. It had hovered interestingly near during that encounter. And it had wavered hopefully after him all the way across the desert to this city.

He gulped audibly. The inference was crazy, but if this was a world in which *djinns* were real, then craziness was sense. And then something else occurred to him.

"How long after my arrival did the one-eyed man come to claim the camels?" he demanded.

The slave-girl shrugged.

"One hour. No more. That was why we were sure."

"And the camels were stolen by the seashore."

"You stole them! By the sea."

"I traveled some hours by camel," said Tony grimly. "He followed their footprints in the sand, if he knew where to demand them. He traveled as far on foot as I did on camel-back—if he tells the truth! But it took me five hours to reach the city from the sea on camel-back. Yet he made the journey on foot in only one hour more. How fast does the one-eyed man walk? As fast as a camel, even trailing?"

The girl, Ghail, stared at him. Her face went blank. It was a five-hour journey from the sea to the city. She knew it as well as Tony. That was by camel. On foot it would take a man ten hours or better. If the one-eyed man had trailed the camels, he could not possibly have arrived so soon. Not possibly.

"A whirlwind followed me all the way," said Tony. "And—I killed a one-eyed man with a slit nose as he and two companions tried to rob me. Somehow, I think that the one-eyed man who got the three camels sometimes doubles as a whirlwind."

His conscience was strickenly silent. But Ghail knitted her brows and stamped her bare feet and snapped a number of Arabic words she had never taught Tony. They crackled. They sparked. They seemed to have blue fire around the edges.

"The misbegotten!" she cried furiously. "The accursed of Allah! From his own mouth comes the proof that he lied! *He* was the *djinn*! He has made mock of the wisdom of men! Now he, and all his fellows, will laugh!"

She turned upon Tony.

"And you," she cried, "are as stupid as the *djinns*! Why did you never ask about your camels." Then she added suspiciously: "But were they camels? Perhaps they also were *djinns*! Perhaps it is all a trick! You may be another *djinn*! This might be——"

Tony threw up his hands.

"In my world," he said helplessly, "*djinns* exist only in fables."

"Your world?" snapped the girl. "How many worlds did Allah make? And if *djinns* are fables, why is the throne of Barkut empty?"

"On the coins?" asked Tony helplessly as before.

She stamped her foot once more.

"On the coins and in the palace! What sort of tool are you? You say you are human? Will you drink of the *lasf* plant?"

"If *lasf* is not something spelled backwards with added vitamins, and if other humans drink it, I have no objection at all!"

She jumped to her feet and hurried to the barred gateway of the courtyard adjoining his cell. She spoke imperiously through the bars. Soon she was back with a polished brass goblet containing a liquid. She tasted it carefully, as if its contents might be doubtful, and then offered it to Tony.

This is *lasf*," she said sternly. "It is poisonous to the *djinns*. If you drink, it is of your own free will."

Tony drank it. From the expression on her face it seemed to be a action of extraordinary importance. He was tempted to make a flourish, but made a face instead. It was not wholly bad, however. It had a faintly familiar flavor, as of something he had drunk before. It tasted a little like some of the herb teas his maiden aunt had dosed him with as a child. From experience he knew that the flavor would last. He'd keep tasting it all day, and it ought to be good for something or other, but what?

He handed back the goblet.

"I wouldn't say," he remarked, "that it would be a popular soft drink back home, but I've tasted worse."

The girl stared at him in seeming stupefaction. Then, as he regarded her expectantly, she suddenly began to flush. The red came into her cheeks and spread to her temples, and then ran down her throat. He followed its further spread with interest. When it had reached her legs she abruptly ran to the gate and hammered on it, crying out fiercely. Soldiers with whiskers and flint-lock muskets appeared instantly, as if they had been kept posted out of sight for an emergency which could only be created by Tony Gregg. They let her out, scowling at him.

He sat down and breathed deeply, staring at the stone wall of his dungeon-courtyard. She'd believed him a *djinn*? Djinns were creatures of Arabian mythology. They were able to take any form, and sometimes were

doomed to obey the commands of anybody possessing a talisman such as a magic ring or lamp. At other times they could scare the pants off a True Believer not so equipped. They kidnapped princesses, whom the heroes of the Arabian Nights unfailingly rescued, and they fought wars among themselves, and they were not quite the same as *efreets*, who were always repulsive, while *djinns* might take the form of very personable humans. They were also not quite so dreadful as *ghuls*—from which the English word “Ghoul” is derived—who live on human flesh.

There was a wooden bench against the wall at which Tony stared abstractedly. He became aware that it was oscillating vaguely. It thumped this way, and that, and just as the oddity of its behavior really caught his attention, the bench fell over. It tumbled sidewise with a heavy “thump” to the hard-baked clay floor.

Tony looked startled. Then he got up and went over to the bench. At a moment when *djinns* were recently made plausible, erratic behavior of furniture suggesting ghosts was practically prosaic. He examined the overturned object. There was a minor quivering of the wood as he touched it. It felt almost alive.

He heaved it up, so completely offbase mentally that he acted in a perfectly normal manner. He was actually too dazed to do anything else. The quivering of the bench stopped. He saw a bug on the hard-baked clay—a beetle, lying on its back and wriggling its legs frantically. It was pressed solidly into the clay, as if the full weight of the bench had thrust it down without crushing it. It was a trivial matter. An absurd matter. It was insane to bother about a bug on the ground—.

But as he looked down at the wriggling black thing, its outlines misted. A little dustiness appeared in mid-air, down by the floor. Then Tony Gregg’s hair stood up straight on end, so abruptly that it seemed each separate hair should have cracked like a whiplash. He backed away, goggling.

And a tiny whirlwind appeared, and rose until it was his own height or maybe a little taller, and then an amiable but unintelligent female face appeared at the top of it. The face was two feet wide from ear to ear. It was a bovine, contentedly moronic face with no claim whatever to beauty. It beamed at him and said:

"Sh-h-h-h-h!"

Tony said;

"What?"

"There is danger for me here," said the female face, beaming. "I have hidden here for days. I was"—it giggled—"that beetle under the bench. Before that I was a fly on the wall. My name is Nasim. Please do not tell that I am here!"

Tony gulped. He clenched his hands and stared at the swirl of dust on the courtyard floor. It went down practically to a point where he had seen the bug pressed in the clay, but at his own shoulder-height it was almost a yard across, like an elongated, unsubstantial top which swayed back and forth above its point of support.

"You are—" Tony gulped—"a—a *djinn*?"

"I am a *djinnee*," said the beaming face, coyly.

Tony gulped again.

"Oh . . ."

The face regarded him sentimentally. It sighed gustily.

"Do I frighten you in this shape?" it asked, more coyly than before. "Would you like to see me in human form?"

Tony made an inarticulate noise.. The fat face atop the whirlwind giggled. The mist thickened. Substance seemed to flow upward into it from the ground. A human form appeared in increasing substantiality in the mist. The round face shrank and appeared in more normal size and proportion on the materializing human figure. Tony's mouth dropped open. He abruptly ceased to disbelieve in the existence of *djinns*. He was prepared to concede also the existence of *efreets*, *ghuls*, leprechauns, ha'nts, Big

Chief Bowlegs, spirit control, and practically anything anybody cared to mention. Because from the small whirlwind a convincingly human female form had condensed.

The pink-skinned, rather pudgy figure cast a look of arch coyness upon Tony.

"Do you prefer me as a human woman?" asked the figure, giggling. "I would like you to like me . . ."

Tony caught his breath with difficulty.

"Why—er—yes, of course. But—just in case somebody looks in the gate, hadn't you better put some clothes on?"

The *djinnee* who called herself Nasim looked down at her human body and said placidly:

"Oh. I forgot."

Garments began to materialize. And then there was a clanking at the gate, and then a howl of fury, and a flint-lock musket boomed thunderously in the confined space of the courtyard. The pink-skinned, pudgy female form seemed to rush outward in all directions. There was a roaring of wind, and a dark whirlwind, giggling excitedly, sped upward and fled away. Even in flight, and even in the form of a whirlwind, it looked somehow rotund and it looked somehow sentimental.

And then Tony was knocked around in the middle of the excitement that followed. A half dozen soldiers in baggy trousers and slippers were firing thunderously but futilely at the vanishing patch of smoke in the sky. And there was a fat man with a purple-dyed beard, and there was Ghail, the slave-girl, with a great deal more clothes on than before. She looked at Tony with a distinctly unpleasant expression on her face.

"Now," said Ghail ominously, "would you tell me the meaning of that *djinn* hussy, without clothes on, being in the very palace of Barkut?"

Tony's conscience, also, caught its breath and began to express its highly unfavorable opinion of things in general, and of Tony in particular.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tony Gregg's conscience had been formed by the worthy spinster aunt who raised him. Having no more normal outlet for the creative instinct, she had worked on Tony's conscience. And following a celebrated precedent, she made it in her own image. In consequence, Tony had a rather bad time.

That night, with somewhat the effect of pacing the floor in anguish beside his bed, his conscience gave him the works. Horrible! Horrible! said his conscience. Here it had spent the best part of his life trying to make him into a person who, in thirty or forty years of diligence, scrupulous attention to his duties, and a virtuous and proper life, would attain to the status of a brisk young executive. Tony's conscience conveniently ignored the fact that after thirty or forty years of virtue and scrupulosity, Tony would neither be young nor brisk. And what had Tony done? demanded his conscience bitterly. He had won more than eleven thousand dollars in the low and disreputable practice of betting on horse-races. But had he invested that windfall in gilt-edged securities? The question was rhetorical only. Tony knew that he had not. He'd come on a wild-goose chase across half the world, to arrive at this completely immoral and utterly preposterous place of Barkut! He had spent three weeks in jail! His conscience metaphorically wrung its hands. And now —now a slave-girl who showed her legs aroused his amorous fancy. Worse, a female *djinn* with no modesty whatever—.

Tony yawned. He felt somewhat apprehensive about the *djinnee* who said her name was Nasim, but he was certainly not allured. He was even almost grateful, because the slave-girl, Ghail, had been in the sort of rage a girl does not feel over the misdeeds of a man she cares nothing about. And Tony felt a very warm approval of Ghail. It was not only that she had nice legs. Oh, definitely not! He approved of many other things about her.

And besides that, she was a nice person. She treated him like an individual human being, and during all his life heretofore Tony had been surveyed as a possible date, or a possible husband if nothing better turned up, but rarely as a simple human being.

He turned over in bed. He was no longer in his cell, but in something like a bridal or royal suite in the palace. It was so huge that he felt a bit lonely. The ceiling of his bedroom was all of twenty feet tall, and arched, with those sculptured icicles he had seen in pictures of the Alhambra in Spain. The floor was of cool marble tiles, with rugs scattered here and there. The bed itself was hardly more than a pallet upon a stand of black wood ornamented in what certainly looked like gold. The coverings were silk. There was a pitcher of some cooling drink by his elbow, and if he pulled a silken bell-cord a slave would come in and pour it for him.

His position in Barkut had changed remarkably during the day. At the moment of the excitement over Nasim, Ghail had brought a chamberlain with a purple-dyed beard to explain that his imprisonment had been all a mistake. He had been mistaken for a *djinn*, disguised as human for the purpose of undesirable political activity within the city. Since he wasn't a *djinn*—and drinking the *lasf* proved he was not—and since he had told the girl, Ghail, that when he talked to the rulers he would be high in favor and rich . . . well, the rulers wanted to know what he had to offer in exchange for favor and riches. Also—Ghail had put in sullenly—if the king of the *djinns* of these parts had sent a *djinnee* at great risk into Barkut to beguile him, it was evident that the *djinn* also attached great importance to him. So the rulers of Barkut wanted to know why he had come to their city.

Tony had let himself be led to a great hall with zodiacal figures in brass carved into the black-marble floor. The throne of Barkut stood beneath its canopy against the far wall. It was empty. But there were six ancient men

seated on rugs before it, smoking water-pipes. They smoked and coughed and wheezed and looked unanimously unhappy and old and ineffective. But their red-rimmed eyes dwelt on the slave-girl before they turned to Tony, so he felt that there was some life in them yet.

They greeted him with fussy politeness and had him sit and then wheezingly asked him who he was, where he came from and what he wanted.

Ghail intervened before he could answer and explained that Tony had come from a far country, and that he had crossed the farthest ocean on a great flying bird. Tony had told her as much, lacking an exact Arabic term for a transatlantic plane or even for a converted four-motored bomber. He had traveled farther, Ghail added, in a boat of steel with fire in its inwards. This was a repetition of Tony's description of the somewhat decrepit steamer from Suez to Suakim. And these things, Ghail said firmly, she had believed to be lies from a more than usually stupid *djinn*, but since Tony was no *djinn* but a human, who was inexplicably sought after by the local *djinn* king, she believed them absolutely.

The six councilors smoked and coughed and made other noises common to elderly people. Tony opened his mouth to speak, and again the slave-girl forestalled him.

In his homeland, said Ghail truculently, Tony was of a rank second to none. This was her interpretation of his attempt to explain that nobody in America was of higher rank than he was, as a citizen. He was a prince, Ghail elaborated, journeying in quest of adventure and to see the peoples of the earth—an activity considered highly appropriate in princes. His nation had so subdued the *djinn* that they, the humans, rode in the air with ease and safety, and spoke to each other privately though a thousand miles apart, and traveled in personal vehicles with the power of forty and fifty and an hundred horses, and were mightier in war than any other people under the sun.

These statements also Tony had made in the course of

his language lessons. He had thought Ghail was impressed, then, and she was not an easy person to awe. But now she repeated them parrot-like, with a belligerant air as if daring anybody to question them. In short, she said, Tony was a very dangerous person. On the side of the *djinn*—and the king of the *djinn* had already tried to allure him by the charms of a *djinnee*—he would be dangerous to Barkut. Therefore he should either be secured as an ally of Barkut, or else executed immediately before he could set out to help the *djinn*.

Tony protested feebly.

"Did you not tell me that you were in the greatest of all wars?" Ghail demanded. "In which millions of humans were killed? Did you not say that your nation ended the war by destroying cities instantly, in flame hotter than the hottest fire?"

Tony had unquestionably mentioned atomic bombs. He had also said that he was in the war. He had not mentioned that he had spent it at a typewriter, of course—since Ghail would not know what a typewriter was. Of course!

"So you," said the slave-girl firmly, "will swear by the beard of the Prophet to lead the armies of Barkut to victory over the *djinn*, or else—"

Ultimately he swore, gloomily, on a book with a binding of marvelously ornamented richness. It was a Koran, and he had never read it and did not believe its contents. More, he did not know what sort of beard the prophet had worn, so it could not be said that there was a meeting of minds, and possibly the contract was not really valid. But he felt an obligation, nevertheless. Late that night, unable to sleep, it recurred. The ancient men of the Council of Regents of Barkut had given him their confidence out of the direness of their need. The slave-girl, Ghail, counted on him, because there was no one else to turn to. The danger to Barkut from the *djinn*, he gathered, was extreme. The plant *laf* was a protection against them,

but bullets merely stung them, and *lasf* grew constantly more difficult to come by. The *djinn* grew bolder and bolder as the humans in Barkut ran into the technological difficulties inherent in a shortage of *lasf*. The *djinn*, in fact, had become so bold that, four years previously, their local king had kidnapped the authentic queen of Barkut and now held her prisoner, which, Tony discovered, explained the empty throne and the Council of Regents. For some reason not clear to Tony, the ruler of Barkut could not actually be injured by a *djinn*, though her subjects were not so fortunate. Therefore the Queen's only sufferings were imprisonment and the ardent courtship of the *djinn* king. Still . . .

Lying wakeful in bed in the royal suite of the palace, Tony surveyed this statement of the situation with distrust. It sounded naive and improvable, like something out of the Arabian Nights. It was. Like all the events stemming from his purchase of a ten-dirhim piece in an antique-shop on West 45th Street, New York, it was so preposterous that he pinched himself for assurance that his present surroundings were real.

They were. His leg hurt like the devil. He rubbed it, scowling. Then he heard a thud on the windowsill of his bedroom. He got out of bed, suspicious. He went to the window. Nothing. It looked out upon a small garden designed for the occupants of this suite. There was grass and shrubbery and small trees and a fountain playing in the starlight. It smelled inviting. Beyond it lay the palace, and beyond that the city, and beyond the city was the oasis and the desert. And somewhere—somewhere unguessable—lay the dominions and the stronghold of the *djinns* beyond the desert.

His conscience wrung its hands. In the fix he was in, to be thinking about *djinns* and captive queens and such lunatic items! How about those fine plans for the import-export business between Barkut and New York? What had he learned about the commercial products of Barkut?

What was the possible market for American goods? If he went with no more than he now knew to an established firm in New York to get them to take up the matter, what information could he give them that would justify them in offering him an executive position? Why, if he'd only confined his attention to proper subjects like imports and exports instead of trying to rouse the romantic interest of a long-legged slave-girl, nobody would ever have thought of asking him to lead an army——.

Rubbing his leg where it hurt, he gazed out into the garden and rudely thrust his conscience aside. That garden looked romantic in the starlight. He wouldn't mind being out there right now with Ghail . . .

Something stirred on the windowsill almost beside his hand. He started, and in starting dislodged one of the soft silken cushions that were everywhere about this place. It fell to the floor. Then he saw a dark shape on the windowsill like a frog. He groped for a shoe to swat it with, and it jumped blindly into the room. It was a frog. He could tell by the way it jumped. But it landed with a cushioned, smacking "thud" such as no frog should make. It sounded like a couple of hundred pounds mashing a pillow flat and whacking against the floor beneath. The pillow, in fact, burst under the impact. Stray particles of stuffing flew here and there. More, from within the burst cushion came gutteral swearing in a deep bass voice.

Then the split silken covering inflated and burst anew, and a swirling luminous mist congealed into a solid shape, and Tony found himself staring at an essentially human form. It had the most viciously developed arms and shoulders he had ever seen, though, and a chest like a barrel, and a wrestler's legs. Its head and face were of normal size, but it took no thought whatever to decide that the features were those of a *djinn*. The slanting, feral eyes, the tusks projecting slightly from between the lips, the pointed ears,—it was a *djinn*, all right, and a *djinn* in a terrible temper.

"Mortal!" it growled. "You art that strange prince who came across the desert!"

Tony swallowed.

"You art that creature, that mere human, who ensnared the love of Nasim, the jewel among *djinnees!*" raged the creature. It pounded its chest. "Know, mortal, that I am Es-Souk, her betrothed! I have come to tear you limb from limb!"

Tony's conscience said acidly that it had told him so. He was not aware of any other mental process. He simply stared, open-mouthed. And the *djinn* leaped on him with incredible agility.

Sinewy, irresistibly powerful hands seized his throat. They tightened, and then relaxed while the *djinn* said gloatingly:

"You shall die slowly!"

Then they tightened again, bit by bit. The *djinn*, for this enterprise, had undoubtedly modeled the shape he had assumed upon a champion human wrestler, with improvements. And Tony had not lately taken any systematic exercise greater than that of punching the buttons in an automat restaurant. It was not adequate preparation for hand-to-hand conflict with a *djinn*. He clawed at the strangling hands with complete futility. Then a strange calmness came to him. Perhaps it was resignation. Possibly it was a lurking disbelief of the reality of his experiences, lingering in the back of his mind. But being strangled, even if it were illusion, was extremely uncomfortable. He remembered a part of the basic combat training he had received before being assigned to sit at a typewriter for the glory of his country's flag. An axiom of that training was that nobody can strangle you if you only keep your head. All you have to do—.

Tony did it. Because being strangled is painful.

He reached up with both hands and in each hand took one—just one—of the *djinn*'s sinewy fingers. One complete human hand is stronger than a single finger even

of a *djinn*. Tony bent the single finger ruthlessly backward. Something cracked.

The *djinn* howled. The noise was that of a steam-whistle. Tony hastily repeated the process. Something else cracked. The *djinn* roared, and let go. There were dim shoutings and rushings in the corridors of the palace. But Tony remained alone, gasping for breath, in the high-ceilinged room with this creature who said that he was Es-Souk the betrothed of Nasim. At this time Tony remembered Nasim only as a beaming misty face and a pudgy human figure which was exclusively pink skin, breast and bellowing.

Tony coughed. His throat hurt, and he had been half-strangled. He coughed again, rackingly.

The monstrous and now unhuman bellowing figure sneezed. The blast of air practically knocked Tony off his feet. Then Es-Souk uttered cries which were suddenly bellowings of terror. He sneezed again, and the silken bed-sheets flapped crazily to the far corners of the room.

Then the *djinn*'s figure melted swiftly into a dark whirlwind which poured through the window. There were poundings on the door, but Tony paid no attention to them, as he crossed groggily to the window and stared out.

A shape fled in panic among the stars. It was a whirlwind of dark smakiness, but the stars were very bright. The whirlwind, which was the *djinn* Es-Souk, fled in mortal terror—or perhaps immortal terror—from the vicinity of the palace of Barkut. And as it fled, it paused and underwent a truly terrific convulsion. Lightnings flashed in it. Thunder roared in it. The whole sky and the countryside was lighted by the flashings.

When a whirlwind sneezes, the results are impressive.

To be Continued

THE PEACEFUL MARTIAN

BY J. T. OLIVER

ZARK, the ship's pilot, set the controls on automatic and leaned back in his seat. He stifled a yawn and asked, "Are you still enjoying your trip, Karto?"

Karto looked up from the book he had been studying. "It does get monotonous," he admitted with a smile. "But when I consider the importance of this mission I don't mind a little personal inconvenience."

Zark laughed. "I see what you mean. If Planet Three is as rich in the *bosk* ore as our scientists seem to think, we'll have an unlimited supply of fuel for our space-ships. Why, the ships of Mars can explore the universe!"

"I'm not worried about the ore being there," answered Karto seriously. "I'm just afraid the inhabitants there—assuming there *are* some—won't let us have it."

"Well, we can always *take* it," Zark said lightly.

Karto frowned. "Yes, I'm afraid that's what will happen if my mission is unsucessful, and I don't arrange some sort of trade agreements. They practically threw me out of the Council when I first suggested trying to trade for the ore."

Zark smiled slightly. "I seem to remember you had a little trouble; most of the people seem to think you would have been voted out, except for the fact that your father is our First Man."

Karto shook his head perplexedly. "I don't know what to think of our good people. We haven't had a war on Mars for six hundred years, and just as soon as we get in a position to contact another planet, they start yelling for a fight, just to get the *bosk* ore."

Zark said, "I understand how they feel about it. The scientists, especially, have good reasons for wanting to seize the ore by any method. After all, the ships were designed some hundreds of years ago; it was just an accident that a meteor loaded with *bosk* landed on Mars. It might not happen again in a million years."

Yes, it had been fortunate, thought Karto. Fortunate for the Martians, maybe, but not for the inhabitants of Planet Three. The Martians had huge stockpiles of weapons stored away in underground caverns, just waiting to be used. Karto felt sure the people of the Third Planet were rather backward, or else they would have developed space travel before now. They had plenty of *bosk* ore at their disposal, and that was all that had held the Martians back. Their other sciences were developed to a fantastic degree.

Karto would have been well satisfied had it taken all the available supply of *bosk* to power this first ship. But it hadn't. Back on Mars was enough of the ore to drive a dozen more ships—bigger ones with weapons—to Planet Three.

If Karto wasn't successful, the other ships would come. They wouldn't even try to reason with the alien race. Germ-fog would be released at once. Radio-active powder would fall on the simple, un-offending inhabitants of Planet Three. That planet would die.

Karto didn't want that to happen. Even though he knew nothing about these people he didn't want them to die. Not like that. He'd seen films of some of the old Martian wars, and he knew how terrible and wasteful war was.

It all depended on him. If he succeeded, the planet

would live and prosper with Mars. If he failed the planet would die. Literally.

A few hours later the ship hung motionless over the dark half of Planet Three. Karto and Zark stood in front of the screen, staring at the scene below. They could see a city, with artificial lights. The buildings were all of a peculiar design, but still not too different from Martian architecture.

Karto spoke. "They're even more civilized than I had expected. With such an advanced race it shouldn't be too difficult to reach an understanding."

Zark said uneasily, "That's just another good reason why we shouldn't try to do business with them. A race that far along is almost certain to have weapons, and we didn't bring any kind of protection with us."

Karto laughed. "That's silly, Zark. Civilized people have no use for weapons. They're probably just as democratic as the people of Mars."

"Well, I certainly hope you're right," muttered Zark with a worried frown. Then he added, "I'm supposed to set you down now, and take the ship back up. The council gave me last minute orders to safeguard the ship. I'll drop down again in ten days after you, so be sure you get back to the place I land you."

More distrust, thought Karto. He started to make a comment, but changed his mind. The only way he could convince them of the validity of his plan was to prove it. "Alright," he agreed. "Land near the top of that mountain over there. The atmosphere will be thinner, and no one is likely to spot us."

A few minutes later Karto stood on Earth. The first visitor from another planet! He watched Zark close the airlock and take the ship back up. He smiled as he thought of Zark's suspicions. He'd soon convince his compatriots that it was possible to have friendly relations with aliens!

The air wasn't too much different from that of Mars: just a bit heavier, and the temperature was a great deal warmer. Karto had taken a lot of training before leaving Mars in order to help him withstand the rigors of unfamiliar conditions. He knew that by slowly descending the mountain he would grow accustomed to the increased gravity and denser atmosphere.

After a bit of wandering he found a trail that led downward. He proceeded to follow it around the mountain, walking slowly and carefully in the darkness.

Suddenly he came to a clearing in the trees to one side of the path. A large group of people were gathered there, and one of them seemed to be making a speech. Torches cast a weird glow over the crowd, making their strange costumes even more bizarre. Karto was elated to see that, in spite of their peculiar dress, they were physically nearly the same as Martians..

A friendly smile on his lips, Karto stepped forward to make the First Contact...

* * * * *

The following morning a local paper carried a shocking headline:

**NEGRO MURDERED ON PINE MOUNTAIN
NIGHT RIDERS STRIKE AGAIN!**

* * * * *

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REWARD

BY D. J. REINER

IT WAS HERE AGAIN.

As he prepared the hypodermic, Rand winced under the mounting agony inside his skull, which threatened to splinter his brain into a thousand shrieking slivers. Always it was like this. A few hours—sometimes not even that—when the roaring would vacate his head and he could breathe again. But it always came back. Starting gradually, it would soon swell to a nerve-twisting intensity until every cell in his body screamed for relief. It was living hell.

If it hadn't been for the drugs, he would have slit his own throat long ago. But in them he found a brief escape from pain. Maybe he was doing the wrong thing and he ought to give the medics another try at it. but he was sure it would be useless. Besides, there were compensations. Very nice ones, too.

A keen edge of excitement quickened his preparations. He swabbed his thigh with alcohol and inserted the needle. The brief prick went unnoticed.

Rand stretched himself out on the bed and closed his eyes. Waited for the fingers squeezing his brain to loosen their hold. Waited for that sudden drop into space and the complete silence that always followed.

Lord! he wondered. How long had this been going on? Two years? Or two thousand? No matter. Time no longer had any real meaning for him. Not since the

former Boy Wonder of the Rand-Albertson Foundation had fled from the pain-filled world of reality and found precious peace in the tiny, rubber-capped bottles and the dull sting of the needle. Big-time electrical engineer? That was a big laugh. Must have been two other guys. This was the only reality that mattered, now.

He could feel the triphammers in his head easing off. The blasting had subsided to a low rumble. Now he would keep an appointment. A date with himself to voyage to far-off worlds and in other times. Tonight he would go far. Very far.

He didn't really know what had started it all. Perhaps the continuous and increasingly heavy quantities of a dozen different drugs had finally jarred something loose in his brain. Something that lay sleeping and unused in everybody. Perhaps it was a latent talent that had waited to be aroused and stimulated into activity.

Whatever it was, Rand had it. Definitely.

With it he could free his mind from its fleshy shell and send it soaring to the far ends of the universe. Or he could slip down the corridors of time and watch the ever-changing panorama of the past. There were the Worlds-of-If. History that might have been, if . . . He could travel to a dark star a million parsecs across the void. Or take a simple jaunt around the world to where fabled Atlantis gaped unseeingly at cool surrounding emerald depths. All he had to do was shoot the dream dust into his veins and time and distance were but meaningless words.

When he so desired, Rand sent his cast-off consciousness back through the twisting years. Once he had stumbled, inadvertently, upon Cleopatra as she entertained an eager admirer, and had retired in some confusion at their uninhibited love making . . .

It was always exciting and new. Often it was terrifying. A swirling, shifting kaleidoscope of sights and sounds. For instance, there were the myriad cultures of a million far-flung worlds. Alien. Unhuman. Some far in

advance of anything that earthly minds had ever conceived in the wildest flights of fancy. There were races of creatures which could not even be placed in any particular catagory. Some were beyond the ultimate stage of development—whose outward forms were deceiving and might cloak an incredible intelligence.

He recalled the coruscatingly brilliant denizens of Ganymede. Crystalline in structure, they seemed to possess a perfectly balanced culture. But they were born, lived and died within the space of a flashing second. Generations flourished and flickered out and were replaced with new ones. They floated above a glowing pool of pure white light and made strange, haunting music. Music that rose and fell in queer cadences and tore at the senses. Untold sadness filled their songs and left a burning ache for days.

Rand could no longer look at the moon without fear of going mad. He had *seen* what lurked in stygian crypts deep beneath the pitted surface. Silent, formless, crouching creatures. He had sensed a foul aura of hatred about those lurking *things*. Hating. Waiting. For what?

And there was always the idyllic wonder of that tiny village nestled in the lush, low-rising hills north of the Sea of Dreams in the Venusian twilight zone. Here he knew intimately every one of the strange, bird-like creatures who were just discovering the use of fire. Primitive, yes, but Rand instinctively felt that someday they would be a great people. They knew nothing of war, murder, jealousy. Their vocabulary contained no trace of these words. Often he wished he could help them. But that was not possible, and even if it were, association with man—even one who desired only to assist—might not be to their advantage. He could only watch the slow struggle upward, marvelling at each new discovery, hoping that they would avoid the pitfalls.

This was how he learned of the surrounding universe. The scenes of a thousand worlds clashed and mingled with a thousand others. So that Rand proudly recalled the

glory that had been ancient Greece and then shuddered at the memory of ill-fated Kalgan. Kalgan, once the mightiest planet in the family of Sol and now strung out lifelessly as asteroidal debris between ruddy Mars and mammoth Jupiter. They had not been quite prepared for it yet and somebody had mishandled the power of the atom...A miniature nova—and Sol mourned the loss of one of its brood.

By now Rand had left his pain-tortured body far behind on a squalling little planet lost somewhere in the deep pool of cosmic night. A sensation of limitless power pervaded his being so that nothing seemed impossible and he was master of all he surveyed.

Rand had always been fascinated by the idea of a finite universe. He had never accepted the concept of infinity. It was too illogical. And if there were an end to this space-time continuum, what, if anything, lay beyond? Tonight, he decided, he would try to learn the answer...

Through an eternity of stars, he flung his mind outward at a velocity not to be measured in ordinary calibrations. Yet it was only after an infinitesimal moment that he entered a vast area of space where few suns flared and the immense void between each pinpoint was frightening and filled him with a cold, nameless dread. And still he went on; out past this last thin cluster of light and warmth; past strange straggling patches of an even deeper blackness than the surrounding nothingness. After a time the void remained unbroken. Empty of all matter. Impenetrable.

This must be the very rim of the finite universe, he thought. If he went on, would he finally drop off into a bottomless nothingness? He paused to consider the possibilities. Well, there was only one way to find out...

There was no real fear in him as he hurtled through the impalpable barrier. Only a faint wrenching sensation marked his passage from one dimension to another.

Then he emerged on the other side. Of what? For a

brief second he was unable to see anything. Then he was able to make out a vast, gray, shadowless expanse that stretched unbrokenly in every direction. A cold, wan light washed dully over the wasteland. Rand, poised at a low height above the ground, was puzzled by the complete absence of anything even faintly resembling vegetation. Neither flora nor fauna, he decided.

This was some place. Not even a committee to welcome the intrepid interdimensional traveler. Just empty, flat grayness. But *wait!*

There *was* something out there. And close by, too. He could sense its presence very keenly. Unpleasantly so. Gentle tendrils were probing deeply into his mind, flowing easily into every crevice. A faint prickling sensation made silence hard to bear.

"Who are you?" he asked tensely.

No answer. The explorations went on uninterrupted. It was as though a master surgeon were peeling away layer after layer of his brain, painstakingly examining each synapse and convolution, and then instantaneously replacing the sections so that he could not be certain that anything of the sort were actually happening. Presently he felt the tendrils withdraw.

He could still discern nothing near him, but abruptly a thought formed in his mind:

"Do not be afraid. I have been waiting for you."

Rand was stunned. "But how did you know I was coming?"

"You misunderstand," the voice continued. "I knew that ultimately the barrier would be penetrated. I meant only that I was expecting *somebody*."

"Are you—invisible?"

"Hardly!" He sensed amusement in the thought. "You are wondering what I look like? Then, see!"

Rand stopped thinking. There, directly in front of him, on that dead gray plain stood the most beautiful woman that had ever lived. She was a goddess come to life. Yet

she was beyond mere divinity. She was like a partly-remembered melody, tantalizing, promising. She was the dream, the half-seen ideal of every man.

A simple white garment half-concealed the softly-rounded curves of her body. The tiny, delicate features of her face were framed with smooth dark hair. Full red lips curved sweetly as she spoke to him:

"You did not expect me to appear so—feminine?" She laughed warmly. "Ah, but then there is much you do not know about me."

"But I would very much like to know *all* about you!" Rand said vehemently. "Do you have a name?"

The girl looked startled for a moment. "Name? Oh, yes. But you would find it hard to pronounce. In your language, however, it would sound vaguely like Loana, and you may call me that."

"Loana!" he repeated dazedly.

"And I already know that yours is Rand."

He regained his composure long enough to ask:

"But is this your home? Do you live in this"—he gestured vaguely—"nothingness? Or did you . . .

She interrupted him with a laugh. "If you will be patient I will try to answer all of your questions.

And she did. She spoke at some length and Rand listened intently to an amazing story.

Loana was the last of her race. She had been born in our own universe, but at a time when Sol had not yet spawned its worlds. Her people were a wise and gentle folk whose technological progress did not outpace their social development. War had been quickly eliminated from their society. Gradually and peacefully a magnificent civilization had spread out from the mother planet. Eventually all the surrounding galaxy was a tightly-knit federation with all the worlds enjoying a rich and satisfying life. It seemed that the future held only greater promises and everlasting peace. Until—

The entirely unforeseen occurred. From the vast un-

explored deeps of outer-galactic space poured a frightful horde of powerfully-armed vampire-like invaders. Intent only on sating their fearful hunger at the expense of this gentle race, the marauding creatures launched an immediate and overwhelming attack. The outcome was painfully inevitable. Loana's people were slaughtered in the most ghastly fashion. The worlds of the defenseless galactic federation were quickly cleared of all sentient life, planet by planet and solar system by solar system. Hundreds of billions became fodder for the monsters' insatiable appetites, until only a few scattered groups remained.

Loana was one of such a group. Hunted by day and night, they sought refuge on one of the inner planets. There they hoped to remain until the invaders finished their hellish orgy and moved on. This ruse might well have succeeded if it had not been for the completely unpredictable ferocity of the creatures.

Enraged at not being able to find additional sustenance on the decimated worlds, the monsters used a vibratory weapon to rip apart the very suns and planets of the doomed galaxy. When the attack came upon the planet on which Loana and her friends had sought refuge, it seemed to the frightened girl that the very heavens burst into flame. Explosion followed explosion in mounting crescendo. So inconceivably violent was the holocaust that the very fabric of space itself was warped and twisted by the enormity of the cosmic blasts. Thus, instead of being consumed in a final burst of atomic fire, Loana had been thrown clear out of that galaxy into this timeless, lifeless waste. Here she had been imprisonment for untold ages, needing neither food nor drink. Bound to this dismal monotony, Loana had, however, devoted her time to developing certain latent inner forces. She found that she could send her mind through the dimensional barrier—just as Rand had succeeded in doing by means of drug stimulation. She too had roamed the depths of interstellar space, but only as an onlooker. Often she had attempted to communicate

with intelligent life on the other side, but every effort had been in vain.

She concluded her story with a direct appeal: "Rand, won't you please help me leave this awful place?"

"Help you? Of course. But how?"

She smiled wanly. "Fortunately I have had a considerable, a very considerable time to study all the many difficulties and problems involved in breaking the space-time stasis in which I now find myself. It cannot be accomplished from this side, for several reasons, but if certain controllable forces were set in motion on your world, and directed according to careful instructions . . ."

"You mean that if I were to set up the right apparatus you would be freed?" Rand interrupted.

"Exactly. And I would emerge on your world."

His mind a riot of eager excitement, Rand asked: "But could I actually construct such a machine? Do we have all the necessary materials?"

"According to what I have been able to learn of your world, all the required materials are easily available. Your technical background and experience should be more than sufficient. In fact, the actual construction of the machine will present no great problem. It is only necessary that the instructions be followed precisely." She looked at him hopefully, eyes shining brightly, and said softly, "Will you help me, Rand?"

"Will I!" he fairly shouted. "Just tell me what I must do."

Loana smiled so sweetly that Rand knew at that moment that, if she asked it, he would go to Hell itself for her.

"In a moment," she said. "First I must tell you that if you succeed—and I know you will—you will not go unrewarded."

Rand said almost angrily: "Reward? Bah! My reward will be to have you free—and on Earth . . ."

He could have sworn that she was blushing.

"Don't be foolish! Do you know what it is that I can give you?" she paused, then added: "Immortality!"

Rand said nothing.

"Yes, Rand," she continued, "immortality! You and I will live until the Universe itself is dead. And even then we shall not die! All you must do is follow my instructions."

"Tell me what must be done."

"Relax now," Loana said quietly. "Open your mind completely to mine. Let me enter freely. I shall impress upon your subconscious a series of detailed and concise blueprints and plans. You will remember everything when you return to Earth." As she launched into a technical description of the machine he was to build, Rand felt himself sinking into a semi-hypnotic condition.

After a time he was again aware that she was speaking directly to him. "... and now," she was saying, "you must return to Earth. There is no need for us to contact each other again. You already have all the necessary information. When the machine is completed, turn it on and I shall come to you. And we shall be together for a long time. Forever, in fact." Her eyes glistened warmly.

Then she was gone. Only the memory of her loveliness burned in his brain. He must go back now. There was much that had to be done, if he wished to see her again. Would he succeed? His senses still reeling, Rand sent his consciousness away from the timeless shadow world, back through the barrier towards home.

He opened his eyes slowly, blinked unseeingly at the littered room. Was he really back? Yes, the dingy hole was the same as ever. A pungent whiff of next-door cooking sat him upright. He was sharply reminded that it had been a very long time since he'd had anything at all to eat.

Washing down a tasteless meal with a cup of black coffee, Rand sat in the tiny kitchen and felt something tugging persistently at the back of his brain. He was still groggy, but he knew there was something he had to re-

member. Something about a promise he'd made to somebody . . .

Loana!

The whole unbelievable, wonderful dream came back to him. Dream? Hell, no. It was the sweetest reality he'd ever experienced. Somewhere out there where no stars shone and time did not exist, Loana waited on that dreary wasteland. Waited for him to deliver her from an age-long vigil.

And the machine he'd promised to build! Where a moment ago only fuzzy, half-seen images cluttered his brain, now a torrent of sharp, clear thoughts fought to be remembered. Then it all fell into place. Every line, every dimension, the finest detail, all the underlying principles of operation, came into focus. He knew what had to be done.

It was only a matter of several hours for him to transcribe the information onto paper. His rusty engineering knowledge came back to him, slowly at first, and then quite easily. He prepared a concise set of blueprints, and drew up a list of materials. He dug deep into his memory for the names of the firms that might handle the work. Gradually it dawned on him that for the first time in—how many years?—he was doing something other than doping himself into a coma.

The next few months found Rand dashing madly about New York. He ran himself ragged. It wasn't easy to pick up where he had left off. And the purchases took almost every cent of his shrunken bank account. One of the first things he did was to move into different quarters. He chose a large, well-lighted room in Rockefeller Center.

Although his nerves were strung almost to the breaking point, Rand drove himself relentlessly. And work seemed to have a salubrious effect on him. He even found it possible to taper off slightly in the use of narcotics. Still, when the attacks hit him, he turned to the drug eagerly and was glad that he could kill the agony that

regularly rose up to interfere with his work. It was a gruelling project, but Rand never forgot for a moment the reason for it. And thought of Loana brought renewed strength.

He ran into a score of temporary but annoying snags. Many of the firms with whom he contracted were startled and suspicious at his requests for unfamiliar and unorthodox parts and assemblies. In such cases, Rand found that a lavish bonus distributed at the proper levels brought the most heart-warming cooperation. It was not long before he was getting delivery on most of his orders. By sleeping only in snatches and by taking time out to eat only when his stomach stubbornly refused to be ignored, the work gradually began to take definite shape. Like a madman, he launched into the final assembly.

Rand surveyed the completed job with a tired but satisfied smile. It had been a tough, back-breaking assignment for him, but he was more than pleased with the results.

In the center of the room stood an unprepossessing bulk of apparatus. Little could be seen of the actual inner working mechanism. Only Rand knew of the complex electronic assemblies and the intricate tangle of wiring that lay within the heart of the two large copper cylinders which supported a small, disc-shaped metal platform. The heavy BX cables snaking into the base of each cylinder provided enough power to tear apart the warp and woof of space itself.

"Now if it only works!" Rand breathed. He sucked a last drag on his cigarette and walked over to the control panel along the wall. His palms were damp as he carefully checked each dial and made the final adjustments.

And then all was ready.

The main control lever was set in a slot in the center of the panel. Rand's fingers gripped it until the joints stood out yellow-white. He moved it slowly toward the right and waited. A faint hum, barely audible to his straining ears, filled the room. He felt a cool tendril of air brush

his cheek. The windows were all tightly shuttered, but the currents of air continued to blow in wisps and eddies about him.

He fastened his eyes on the disc-platform, as the hum grew deeper. The very air of the room seemed to quiver slightly. Sweat beaded his forehead and ran into his eyes.

He saw a movement in the sheer empty space above the center of the platform!

It began as a point of intense blackness. Quickly expanding in area, it soon filled all the space above the platform, almost touching the high ceiling. It pulsed faintly and unevenly, and formed itself into an almost perfect circle. It seemed to gape like a great round doorway—a doorway that opened out onto the yawning gulfs of unplumbed space.

Presently Rand could discern the beginning of another, smaller circle in the center of the pulsing blackness. It too expanded, became a dull gray that reminded him of that dreadful dimension beyond the stars. Soon it completely replaced the darker circle and ceased to expand. The streaming air currents were now shrieking through the hole with gale-like ferocity, blowing his hair wildly about his face.

Suddenly, without warning, Loana was there on the platform!

Rand's heart was hammering against his ribs until it seemed it would burst through the flesh about it. His throat was dry and parched and for a moment his lips moved soundlessly. Then he said hoarsely:

"Loana! You're free!"

"Yes, Rand. I'm free!" Her voice rang excitedly. "Free!—after more than two billion centuries! Can you conceive of such a length of time, Rand?"

Rand drank in her beauty. She was even lovelier than he'd remembered. Her half-revealed charms were like living flame and made him ache with a fierce desire. He strode toward her.

Loana stepped gracefully off the platform. She held out her shapely white arms. Her eyes held invitation, and her full red lips parted slightly and he could see the tip of her tiny pink tongue.

She said passionately: "Dear Rand, we are together at last!"

Rand swept her violently into his arms, buried his mouth over hers. Her response was immediate and fiery. She pressed her body closer and his senses throbbed. He hardly noticed the tiny trickle of blood that oozed from his lips where she'd bitten him in her ardor. Suddenly an excruciating stab of pain in his chest shattered his ecstasy. He opened his eyes. His arms were empty. A writhing, crimson fog filled the room and choked off his breath.

"Loana!" he shrieked. "Come back to me!"

A low, chilling laugh froze him to the spot.

"Have no fear, Rand. "I won't leave you. I am still here, all around you.

Again the nightmare laughter froze his blood.

He was unable to move, and the blood-red miasma was congealing around him into a frightful, amorphous shape. It embraced him obscenely, its cold, pulpy feelers fastening themselves to his body. A sickening hot ichor ran into his eyes, gagged his mouth. A fetid, eldritch stench tore at his senses, and sent him spinning to the brink of madness. Foul, unnatural thoughts slithered hungrily through his brain.

"Dear Rand," mocked the unspeakable horror, "don't you relish my embraces?" And the *thing* laughed horribly.

A loathesome kiss registered faintly on Rand's rapidly disintegrating mind.

"Poor Rand, you have been grossly deceived. I am not as I originally appeared to you. Did you find me attractive, then?" Again the maddening laughter. "I made myself into the image of your craving for beauty—an Earthly beauty which apparently was quite irresistible!"

Rand writhed impotently under the goading tentacles.

"But you have done very well, indeed," continued the formless monster. "My accidental exile on that outer-dimensional plane was beginning to pall on me. I was also getting quite hungry and... Ah! I see you are thinking of the reward you were to receive for your efforts!"

"Reward?" Rand managed a weak gasp.

"Naturally. Your reward for a task well done—immortality! And receive it you shall." A ghastly, ominous silence, and then the voice said musingly: "But I wonder if you will show the proper appreciation."

But Rand had already blacked out.

Varthanagor, long-exiled member of the Ularthi, immortal race of ghouls and invincible despoilers of half the universe, avidly set about absorbing his first warm-blooded organism in more than two billion centuries—his first food of any kind, in fact, since the destruction of a planet in that galactic raid of long ago had hurtled him into the shadow world. He had released the *korbal* beam directly against the polar cap. There had been a titanic flash, and then nothingness until he had recovered consciousness on the shadow world.

His hunger now was cosmic. The earth mortal lasted but a few seconds. But the brief meal sharpened his senses. He realized now that there were more, many, many more of these small but savory creatures just outside.

Quickly he dispatched a telepathic message to others of his kind throughout the length and breadth of the galaxy. Then, coalescing into his primal form, Varthangor shambled through the door.

* * * * *

**WATCH FOR
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A KNIGHT FOR MISS MERKINS

BY BASIL WELLS

S. AMELIA MERKINS, THE S WAS FOR SOPHRONIA, SMILED GENTLY at the earnest freckled young face of the man. Her mild gray eyes twinkled behind her plastic-framed spectacles as she put her hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, Denny," she said, "but my answer is no. After all, I am old enough to be your mother."

Dennis March shook the crisp rustiness of his unruly hair out of his eyes. He sighed. "But you aren't my mother, Miss Merkins," he objected. His eyes were pleading. "Aw, spaceworms, I don't see why you won't marry me. Once we are rescued and get to Ganymede, I'll have a good job in the mines."

"And you'll meet a dozen girls much prettier and younger than I," Miss Merkins said matter-of-factly. "Sorry, Denny."

The young mining engineer turned to leave. There was a sob in his voice. "I'll always love you, Miss Merkins," he gulped.

Miss Merkins turned back to the large kettle suspended in a pool of boiling water that reached almost to the welded bails. A series of crudely ground lenses concentrated the rays of the distant sun on the liquid and provided the heat for her improvised stove.

"That makes twenty-two of the eligible men," she said softly as she tasted the savory stew with a huge spoon she took from one of the niches in the crystalline rock beside her. "The other seven are married, and Arthur Jensen has never said more than three words to me since we landed on this asteroid."

She sighed. "I think Arth—Mr. Jensen, is the nicest man, even if he has no teeth and never shaves. He's smarter than all the others—I just know it."

"What's this, Miss Merkins?" demanded Captain Devore cheerily. "What were you saying?"

"Just thinking aloud I guess." Miss Merkins' long face flushed. "I think it's hateful the way the other men look down on Mr. Jensen. He may be peculiar, but he understands how to live here on the asteroids better than any of them. We'd all be dead now if it wasn't for him."

The captain scratched where his hair used to be, and his fat cheeks puffed out thoughtfully. "Well," he admitted, "an old meteor and asteroid miner like Jensen should know how to stay alive in space. You'll have to admit, though, that he is peculiar. Space-wacky as the crew put it."

"He's been living alone for so long," argued the school teacher warmly. "With the right influence . . . someone to . . ." Her voice faltered and she felt the warm blood flooding her cheeks once again.

"I'll be pocked by a space boulder!" cried Captain Devore. "Of all the men who escaped from the *Tilday's* wreck, you pick this ragged old prospector." He held up his hand as she protested. "No, don't try to deny it. I have three daughters back on Earth, and I watched them all fall in love. . . . When are you going to marry him?"

"I'm not." Miss Merkins' eyes dropped. "He hasn't even asked me."

The captain snorted. "I'll wager he's the only one who hasn't." His teeth clamped down on his pipestem, a pipe that was never lighted since it consumed precious oxygen. "You could have your choice of all the men, and you pick a space rat like . . ."

Miss Merkins looked directly into the captain's eyes. He muttered and his blunt fingers rasped the stubble of his chin. "Will you tell the men the stew is ready?" she said quietly.

As all the stranded crew and passengers of the meteor-pocked *Tilday* sat down to eat at the rough tables of crystalline rock sheets, blocked up on bases of the same material, Miss Merkins found herself smiling at the shy little man sitting across from her.

"How are you, Mr. Jensen?" she said.

"Hungry," he said, his luxuriant gray whiskers wagging as he spoke. He helped himself to the stew, refusing silently to carry on conversation with those around him.

"Jensy's always hungry, ma'am," a burly blaster laughed. "Food and mining are all he's interested in."

Miss Merkins remembered when the space-wrecked men had treated Arthur Jensen with real respect. That was shortly after the *Tilday's* powerless pocked hull had grounded on this jagged little crystalline asteroid—five miles by seven miles of airless caverns and chill passages. Jensen had been the only man with experience in living off space, he had been roaming the asteroids for most of his life, and he showed them how to make the asteroid liveable.

Under his direction they had sealed off the asteroid's innermost caverns and pumped the ship's atmosphere into the airlessness. At first they had used the atomic heaters to provide heat, and they wore booster masks in the thinner air of the caverns. But, as the old space miner set them to work grinding huge lenses from the crystalline rock to concentrate the sunlight the interior gradually grew warmer. And with the sunlight's concentrated heat they thawed the powdery snow from the asteroid's exterior crevices, thus releasing oxygen, nitrogen, and other gases of some ancient planet's atmosphere.

Once the shipments of seeds intended for the agricultural colony on Ganymede were planted and the prospects of an early death averted, the men had forgotten how invaluable Jensen had been to them. They made him the butt of their practical jokes and their rather broad ideas of humor. And Jensen merely grinned toothlessly and took it.

Miss Merkins frowned at Jensen. He had intelligent blue eyes, most of the time they seemed to be laughing at the others, and she sensed that he was alert to all that took place around him. Why then, she wondered, did he allow the men to consider him a spineless space-warped old fool. She was furious with the silent space prospector.

The men were already finishing eating. An ominous silence grew around the massive tables, a silence that was like the chill of space. Miss Merkins sensed an unspoken menace in the averted heads of the spacers near her. She caught Jensen's blue eyes fixed fleetingly on her. There was an odd expression of sympathy and compassion in them. He knew what was impending, of that she felt sure.

A scarred yellow-haired blaster with a broken nose, Arton Kitts, stood up. He faced the captain and the five passengers who sat at his table.

"We have come to a decision," he said, deliberately ignoring the customary Sir. "We are no longer aboard ship. You have no longer any control over us. We will take what we please, and if you attempt to stop us you will be killed."

The captain was on his feet, his hand frozen in mid-air as he saw the blasters that appeared in half a dozen of the crew members' fists. He, alone of the officers, wore a flash blaster at his waist, and he was hopelessly outnumbered.

The crew and passengers of the wrecked *Tilday* ranged themselves with the mutineers or with the captain. Twenty of the

thirty men swung over to Arton Kitts immediately, and after a few moments of wavering indecision two more of the passengers joined him also. Six men ranged themselves alongside the captain, one of them Dennis March, the red-haired young mining engineer whose proposal Miss Merkins had so recently refused.

"What, if I may ask?" the captain's choked voice boomed out and broke off. "Why do you choose to make trouble now? Haven't I treated you fairly?"

Miss Merkins let her gaze flash around the cavern. How like two groups of boys they were, the big bully and his gang of toadies and the white-faced men they had chosen to attack. Then she saw Arthur Jensen seated calmly at the table spooning at a fresh helping of stew. Apparently he noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

"It's that woman," said Kitts. "There's thirty of us, thirty-one including you, Captain, and she doesn't want any of us. It's only right that she should belong to some man. We're willing to let her choose, but if she don't we'll cut cards for her."

S. Amelia Merkins felt her skin crawl. In all the thirty-five years since she had been born and learned to teach school back there in Saddletree, Wyoming, she had never before seen the gleam of unbridled passion in men's eyes before. Now, with the authority of the captain negated all the evil in the men seemed to have come to the fore.

She heard a few low-spoken words. Arthur Jensen was still busy with his spoon but it was empty. "Stall them off for a little," he said. "Tell them you'll marry me. I won't hold you to it, but we'll checkmate Kitts."

A warm glow thawed the frozen lump in Miss Merkins' throat. This was why she had left Earth to take the position of teacher in one of the mushrooming mining towns of North Ganymede, to meet people as kindly and warmly human as this old space miner was proving to be. Out here on the frontiers of space she had hoped to find real men and women untouched by the artificiality of an effete Earth.

"What do you say, Teacher?" shouted the yellow-haired blaster. "Who's it going to be, or do we have to draw for you?" He watched her eyes dart toward the captain's party. "None of them," he snarled. "We're putting them out into another cave to shift for themselves. It's one of my men or not."

Miss Merkins hesitated, her heart pounding heavily. Jensen took a last spoonful of stew and got to his feet. He shambled over toward Arton Kitts' group, his toothless jaw working slowly. Kitts snarled at the captain.

"Even the half-witted know who's manning the jets," he laughed. "Any more of you guys wanting to join me?"

One or two of the captain's men stirred in their tracks, but none of them stepped forward. Miss Merkins saw that the red-haired mining engineer's jaw was ridged white with locked muscle, but she was glad that he had not deserted Captain Devore.

"Step out, woman," snarled the blaster. "Choose."

Miss Merkins stepped forward, a spare-framed tall woman with her normally pleasant face now frozen into a scornful mask. She paused before Kitts, her eyes cold and angry. Her eyes ranged from face to face, and many an eye shifted away from her clear glance, ashamed. Finally she took the sleeve of Arthur Jensen's ragged spacealls. He looked up at her, seemingly confused.

"Jensen's the man for me," she said.

Arton Kitts' face crimsoned with rage. To him this was an insult. He had felt sure that the schoolteacher would choose him, the most powerful of the revolting spacemen. That had seemed only logical. She would want his protection. Yet she had chosen the space-happy miner deliberately.

Kitts' fist lashed out, sending the old man sprawling to the ground. He looked around. His men were muttering among themselves. If this were a sample of the justice Kitts was planning to dole out they wanted none of it. After all, she might have chosen any one of them. Kitts pulled himself together.

"You doggone lucky old spacer," he shouted, helping Jensen to his feet. "Sorry I hit you so hard. Meant to slap you on the back. Weak gravity fooled me."

Jensen bobbed his head and tried to grin. A trickle of blood wet his gray beard at the corner of his mouth. "I understand," he said simply.

He turned his back on the blaster and walked away across the cavern toward his quarters in a blind tunnel. And with him went Miss Merkins. There was no more ceremony than this, a simple declaration of intent to be married was the law of space on the frontiers. Mrs. Jensen she would be now until death or a Planets' court dissolved the verbal pact.

Jensen led the way along a crystalline-walled tunnel to his quarters. He had lived apart from the others almost from the first, working at mining in the scattered patches of minerals and rock that speckled the asteroid's glassy bulk. Jensen it was who donned his space suit and dragged a loaded sledge of the precious frozen oxygen and other gases from the exterior. And it had been

Jensen who brought most of the useful equipment from the crashed *Tilday*.

Now they passed through a series of crude, but serviceable, locks into a smaller cavern. Miss Merkins opened her eyes wide. Jensen had converted the interior of the cavity into a comfortable little world by itself. Edible Martian moss carpeted the floor and walls of the chamber, and quick-growing Saturnian *vara* shrubs lifted their hardy yellow shoots above the reddish-brown of the moss at regular intervals. In half a dozen improvised hydroponic vats, cut from the crystalline floor, the familiar vegetables of Earth, Venus and Mars grew in profusion.

"We had no idea!" exclaimed Miss Merkins.

Jensen's eyes twinkled. "I've been anticipating a little trouble," he explained. "I'd hoped to be able to provide shelter for the loyal members of the crew." He shrugged, and his bent old body seemed a little straighter. "There'll be bloodshed before many hours I'm afraid," he finished.

"But can't we help the captain?"

"I have a tunnel almost touching the prison cavern," he said. "I'll break it through and bring them here. Then we'll be ready to stand off any of Arton Kitts' attacks."

"But why," Miss Merkins' gray eyes were puzzled, "are they rebelling? It certainly is not because of me. I am not so attractive. And, after all, now I am your wife."

Jensen's eyes smiled. "You are the only woman on the asteroid, Miss Merkins. And I wouldn't say you are ugly. If you were to take off your glasses and do things with your hair you might be surprised."

Miss Merkins blushed. Her hands went up to her tightly-coiled brownish yellow hair self-consciously.

"Of course," said Jensen, "you can get a divorce once we are rescued, and forget about our marriage. It was the only way I could think of to get you away from them. Naturally, I realize that I would never have a chance with you. That's why I never asked you to consider an old broken-down miner like me."

Miss Merkins' eyes flashed. Her lips thinned angrily. "You're the finest man of the lot," she said impulsively, and then clapped her hand over her mouth. Turning she half ran toward one of the hydroponic vats so he would not see the tears that had started.

Jensen looked after her with jaws slack. He started to take a step in her direction, and then shook himself as though to clear his mind of spacewebs. He turned and headed off down a narrow tunnel that angled back toward the main cavern.

Miss Merkins heard his feet scuffing away into the distance. After a time she opened her closed eyes and looked after him. "He is the finest," she asserted stoutly, "I know I'm right."

She took off her glasses hesitantly, and her hands fumbled with her hair. After a moment she made her way across the springy brownish moss to where a polished mirror surface of the crystal wall gave back her image. She turned her long body slowly, critically, and after a moment hid her hot face in her hands.

"There won't be any divorce if I can help it," she whispered.

After a time she began to explore the little cave. Jensen had fitted the egg-shaped cavity up with great care. And she noted, with pride, that his extra clothing was clean, and his blankets were clean and neatly folded. She came across great quantities of material from the *Tilday*, wires, gauges, batteries and metal plates. And in a side corridor, closed by a close-fitting oval of crystal, she found a little work shop well-equipped with improvised tools. Here too she found a half-dozen flash blasters that Jensen was repairing, and above the bench two fully charged rifle flash blasters hung on metal pegs inset into the transparent wall.

Miss Merkins took down one of the guns. She was familiar with the low-pressure air guns used on Earth for hunting, and she found the rifle blaster to be not unlike them. Somehow, with Jensen gone, she felt safer with the gun in her hands, and so, when she went back into the other cavern she carried it with her.

Well that she did so. As she slid the slab shut behind her she sensed that she was not alone. She turned toward the lock that linked Jensen's cave with the crew's cave to see that it was swung open. Her startled eyes saw that the metal bar Jensen had used to lock it in place was burned through, and that a ragged black hole marred the metal plate behind it.

Arton Kitts and three of his men were crossing the little cavern toward her. Kitts grinned at her triumphantly. "Old Jensen's fixed up real cozy isn't he?" he growled harshly. "Letting us starve to death while he lives like a director." He swung his flash blast suggestively. "We're taking over, and we're taking you too. For all of us."

Miss Merkins felt her stomach shrinking into a tight hard mass that left an aching emptiness where it had been. She lifted the gun slowly so that its hooded front sight centered on Kitts' middle. She had shot at gophers and rats back on Earth, and this was a target she could not miss.

"Go — back — through -- the lock!" she ordered tightly, her words spaced and clear. The three men hesitated and halted in their tracks, but Arton Kitts strode confidently forward. Miss Merkins felt her eyes blur momentarily and for one panicked moment wished for her glasses.

"Fixed yourself up real pretty." The blaster's hard black eyes flicked over Miss Merkins. "You're not such a bad-looking dame after all. Maybe I'll keep you for myself!"

"Stop! Not another step!" Miss Merkins' thumb pressed the safety button back and moved up to the firing knob.

The scarred blaster was less than three paces away. He stepped forward; the school teacher closed her eyes, and her thumb jabbed firmly. For a moment there was an awful silence.

Miss Merkins opened her eyes. There was a charred bundle of rags and blackened lumps that might once have been flesh and bones on the seared brown moss. Heat singed at her hair and she saw one of the three men with his flash blaster levelled. She backed away from the hideous thing at her feet and darted into the work shop of Jensen.

Crystal heated white-hot around the door as the concentrated heat of the flash blaster's ray impinged on it, and shattered glassy shards split off to tinkle on the uneven floor. Now the other men were firing, their blasters hurling their concentrated destruction in quick bursts of soundless heat. Warmth flooded through her body, sudden anger that melted the tight, hard knot that was her stomach, and Miss Merkins flung the rifle to her shoulder. She pressed the firing button—held it down until the battery was drained dry of its concentrated semi-atomic charge.

There were no longer any enemy blasts when she put the gun down. Miss Merkins moved cautiously to the shop's heat-blackened entrance and looked out. Only a deep smoking cavity remained in the wall where the lock had been. The three men had gone—escaped before her deadly barrage, or been snuffed out. And, strangely, Miss Merkins did not care very much what had happened to them. She sat down on the springy moss.

That was where she sat when Arthur Jensen and the rescued members of the Captain's party came back through the tunnel that Jensen had driven through to their prison cavern. And Jensen, seeing her flushed face and the flood of wavy golden brown that framed it swallowed a lump in his throat. There was little of the prim schoolma'am about this breathless Amazon with the useless rifle blaster across her spacealled knees.

Dennis March, the rusty-haired young mining engineer, ran toward Miss Merkins. "Are you all right?" he cried.

Miss Merkins' eyes blinked and tears flooded over her lids. She rose to her feet and stumbled blindly forward. She did not see the young engineer. Her eyes went to the shabby, warped, toothless man with the tangle of gray beard.

"Arthur!" she cried. "I was so frightened."

The old space miner clumsily stroked her hair as she clung to him. "That's all right, Miss Merkins," he said. He swallowed. "Mrs. Jensen I mean," he corrected himself with a defiant glare at the others.

Jensen took off the receivers that linked his ears with the crude radio receiving and sending set in the airless little chamber just beyond his work shop. Thirty hours had passed since the attack on his smaller cave, and the Captain and his men had finished sealing off the connecting corridors more than twenty hours before. Now all of the little party were asleep save Jensen.

"Rescue ship should reach us in a few hours," Jensen told his dim reflection in the crystal wall before him. "Guess I might as well get rid of this." His hand rubbed at his beard. He chuckled.

"Wonder how Milly will like me when I'm clean shaven." His eyes grew thoughtful. "She's a fine woman," he told himself, "much too good for me."

Out of a compact leather case hidden under his bench Jensen extracted a small pair of scissors and a razor. A square of metal, a shaving mirror it was, he propped up before him. The scissors began snipping.

Five minutes later he wiped his smooth cheeks and chin with a towel, and took out another banded metal box. His face felt naked he thought ruefully as he opened this box. There was the gleam of white teeth and the pink of artificial denture. He opened his mouth—closed it—and his teeth clicked.

He went toward the heat-cracked sliding oval that was the door.

"Ssh!" It was the voice of Jensen, but changed. S. Amelia Merkins Jensen smiled and slowly opened her eyes in the half-light of their blanket-partitioned sleeping quarters. "I don't want the others to know until I've explained to you."

Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to cry out. The hand of the beardless man who bent over her covered her mouth firmly but gently. "It's all right, Milly," he said softly. "I'm

Arthur Jensen. At least that's been my name for the last year. There's no need for secrecy any longer. A Patrol ship is on its way here."

The schoolma'am relaxed and he took his hand away. She looked unbelievingly at the firm-jawed face of the man she had married. Only his eyes were the same. He was not a young man, but his hair was not gray nor was his body twisted and bent as it had always been before.

"I'm really an operator in the secret service of the Interplanetary Patrol," he explained. "We've been on the trail of a band of pirates who capture spacers, loot them, kill the crews, and then abandon them in space. We learned that the pirates planted some of their men aboard every ship to be captured, and they took control as soon as the attack came."

"That's why I was aboard the *Tilday*. We learned that she was to be raided somewhere in the asteroids." He paused. "I wasn't the only operator on board, there were six of us, but I was the only one to survive the crash with that meteorite. And of course the pirate ship never attacked us."

"But why the secrecy?" She frowned, and then suddenly smiled. "Of course, the outlaws planted among the crew and passengers."

"You're the wife for a patrolman," applauded Jensen. "I checked on each man while we were on the *Tilday*, and since Arton Kitts was the leader. And there were five others. When you flashed down Kitts you saved the Patrol the trouble."

"But how did you get word to the Patrol?"

"Simple enough. I repaired the ship's radio. Tubes were smashed of course, but by sealing the set outside in an almost perfect vacuum I solved that. Finished the job about a week ago and got in touch with the base at Factory In The Sky."

His arm curved comfortably around her. "How do you like me without a beard, Mrs. Neal Hutter?"

Her head was buried in his shoulder. Her shoulders heaved convulsively and when he tipped up her face he saw that she was laughing.

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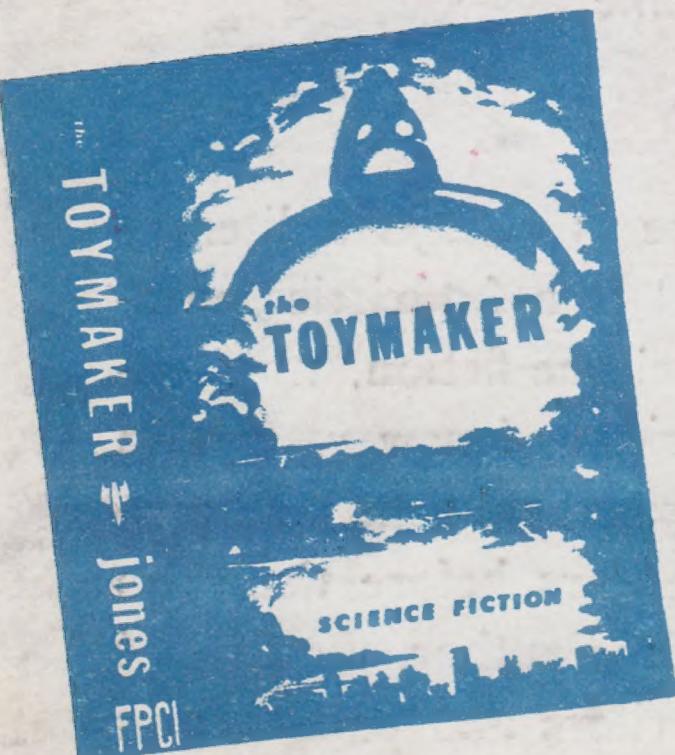
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